WHERE YOUR TREASURE IS

By

John Hastings Turner

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BY JOHN HASTINGS TURNER

WHERE YOUR TREASURE IS
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BY

JOHN HASTINGS TURNER

"True happiness lies in a very few things . . ."

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CHAPTER I.

The sea front at Whyticombe is just like any other sea front. At high noon the asphalt, as if from sheer softness of heart, admits the indent of hundreds of holiday shoes. In the evening, these little human pits become hard impressions, as if desirous from sheer kindness of recording for all time the signet of the holiday makers, who patronise the tiny place. Yet they make their mark for twelve hours at the most, until, in fact, the next day's sun cynically wipes them out with the fleecy and baffling pattern of other pairs of feet.

Even the great white cliff at the end of the sea front is not as permanent as it tries to appear. There are visitors at Whyticombe who remember it when the line from the head, where the coast-guard's cottage lies, ran down to the rocks, truculent and defiant, like the ram of a monster battleship. The patient, sardonic English Channel has broken the pride of the cliff, chipped away her defiant prow, and left her, still showing an obstinate sky-line to whomsoever does her the kindness to look up, but pitifully dismembered beneath and—last insult of

all—the subject of a notice board set up on the beach and bearing this legend: "This cliff is dangerous" . . .

Charles Cutman who was smoking an after-dinner cigar on the front, and who was one of those who had known the great white cliff in the days of her strength and pride, gazed upon the crippled edge, unkindly outlined by the August moon, and felt vaguely depressed.

"Time has defeated you," he murmured. "Time and tide"—he threw away the end of his cigar and rose.

"Time and Tide," he murmured again as he turned back towards his hotel, moved by emotions which his straightforward cast of mind found quite impossible to dissect.

"Funny," he laughed to himself, "I suppose we all of us feel like writing a book sometimes—it wouldn't get very far!"—he paused, "and I daresay that's lucky," he added suddenly.

Looking up he saw the lighted window of his room. Emily, he thought, was getting into bed. Next door was another lighted window. That was Harold's room . . . Harold must have abandoned his game of bridge earlier than usual——

Cutman suddenly wheeled round and looked out again to sea. A soft swell was purring cruelly upon the shingle; "wearing down the pebbles all the time, wearing them down ever so softly."

Too gently and lovingly for complaint. He

thrust his hands into the pockets of his dinner jacket and turned towards the steps which led up to the recently installed swing doors. On the second step he hesitated. Something seemed to be whispering in his ear—"Look at the cliff! look at the cliff! look at the cliff."

Charles Cutman found his heart beating very fast. For a moment he was astonished; it was just as if he was afraid of something.

Then, in a flash,—like a sudden and unexpected message on the telephone, he knew what that something was. He was afraid to look at the cliff. He could not tell why. Anyway of course it was absurd—and yet he hesitated. Then, what he had been taught to call his "manhood" asserted itself. Really, it was childish deliberately to look at the cliff because he thought he was afraid. Such stupid ideas must simply be ignored.

He entered the hotel, prepared to convince himself that he had fought down a morbid and unprofitable moment. Fighting against this assumption was an uncomfortable idea that a fellow of the downright nature which, of course, he knew himself to be, would have taken up the challenge—looked again at the broken cliff—and damned it heartily. Charles Cutman, who was fifty-six years old and had made a very comfortable living at the Bar for a period which now seemed to all intents and purposes eternal, felt a professional aversion to such sudden and unreasoned emotions.

Yet he did not go straight upstairs. Instead, he started down the passage towards the smoking room. Peter Margett and Owen Weare, friends of many years standing, would be certain to be there. They would be almost equally certain to be talking about golf.

He felt he would very much like to hear old Peter and Owen talking about golf . . . even their own golf. When he entered the smoking room he found that it was empty. To-night, its familiarity seemed more insistent than ever before. Every August for twenty-six years he had been to the Beach Hotel at Whyticombe.

Not twenty-six years, surely? . . . Yes, it was twenty-six. He stretched out his hand to the table by his side and drew away a paper at random. It was the "Devon Gazette". His eye, aimlessly roaming over the print, noted an Otter Hunt near Tiverton, a distribution of prizes at a Horticultural Show, held apparently at a place called Shute. He put the paper back and the action jerked his mind into asking how often he had picked up the "Devon Gazette" in that room and put it back on its table.

His self-imposed virility snapped at him. Why the Devil shouldn't he have come to the same room for many years? "You are merely working yourself into a mood," he told himself, "and you are far too old for moods." But this stimulant, this deliberate attempt to shout down and bully his emotions, to which indeed he had long since become

seasoned,—had no effect and he was plunged deep into his 'mood' when he rose and stared frowning into the glass. He could find no reasonable motive for his state of mind (and to Cutman 'reasonable' was very nearly synonymous with 'legal') and he almost hoped to discover one in the glass.

Now the mirror over the smoking room mantelpiece was one of those very disconcerting reflectors which throw back an absolutely detailed inventory of a face.

Looking glasses are many and various as the human species. The Queen Anne specimen in the dressing room tells quite a different tale to that which the white enamelled variety in the bathroom recounts, on the next morning walk, disgruntled, from that unsatisfactory interview with the bathroom glass, and the Queen Anne specimen will still be found to perform her kindly office. There is, of course, some scientific explanation for these discrepancies, but, for all that, the more satisfactory inference is that one glass is more human than another.

Charles Cutman had never been a handsome man: he had never experienced a moment's anxiety about his face. Indeed, he would have considered any anxiety on this score a very serious reflection on his character as a reputable male animal. Still, the mirror in the smoking room at the Beach Hotel, as he put it to himself, was "damned uncompromising."

He wondered whether Emily Cutman saw those horrible affairs under his eyes, and the withering-apple appearance of his neck.

No. Emily wouldn't notice that. He had lived with her long enough to know that she was one of the kindly sort of looking glasses. But that, he thought, as he stretched out his legs towards the crinkled paper in the fireplace, was a damnable conception of a wife. And he didn't look on dear old Emily like that—of course he didn't.

Curse this mood! Why on earth were not Peter Margett and Owen Weare in the room—talking about golf? It was what one had a right to expect of one's old friends; that they would talk of golf, or bridge, or the Near East, or the rate of Exchange, whenever these antidotes to actual life were required.

Charles rose and sighed. On his way out of the room, he again caught sight of his face in the unfriendly glass.

"Well, there it is," he muttered, "I am fifty-seven and I look fifty-seven—it's a rotten tragedy that I don't feel fifty-seven!" Thus he went upstairs to his bedroom, wrapt about with self-pity.

Peter and Owen should have been in the smoking room when he wanted them. And the white cliff—he could have sworn that it had crumbled still further since last year. Beastly depressing. What on earth had possessed him to go and sit on the front all alone after dinner?

He undressed himself in the tiny room which led out of his bedroom, laid his studs out carefully in a line with his watch and his pocket book, and started to brush his teeth. The water was cold and uncomfortable. His pang of irritation was momentary, for he remembered that this was the summer holiday and he must expect to be uncomfortable. They had come down to Devonshire from Waterloo only the day before, and he had been uncomfortable from the moment he had started to pack his bag. Indeed, he had been more or less uncomfortable every August for twenty-six years.

He plastered another unnecessary layer of carbolic upon his teeth and shivered. Of course, Harold had been a great help at Waterloo. Oh, yes, his boy had always been a great help: he felt cheered at the idea of how great a help his boy was. Yet, possibly, had Charles known it Harold had been the greatest help during the first few hours after his birth, when the new life had seemed, in some mysterious way, to give a fresh impetus to the original honeymoon feeling between himself and Emily.

After those first inspired hours, there was a great deal of Harold, but never quite the same thrill from his mere being. There was Harold going to his first school, Harold passing an examination into his second school, Harold being confirmed, an incident which his father found himself unable to regard as

the crisis which Emily, apparently quite sincerely, considered it to be.

Later, Harold at Oxford: Harold with ridiculous phases and ideas — Harold reading books which his father had never heard of, books written by men ten or fifteen years older than himself—books which Harold called "great"; finally, Harold, more or less grown-up, good-mannered, getting on quite adequately in the Chambers where his father had placed him—altogether to be sure, satisfactory, respectful, kind—unconsciously, in fact, making it evident every minute of the day that Charles Cutman, in all likelihood, was going to die, some thirty years before he did—and was, to that extent, so far out-of-date and so far to be respected. Lately, the father had noticed — when Harold was in a particularly healthy mood, that his son would address him as 'sir.' There was the luggage at Waterloo, for instance. He had experienced some trouble with a fool of a porter, and Harold had been at his elbow. "Don't bother yourself about it, sir," Harold had said, "I'll see the stuff in——"

He remembered answering: "Right-o! Harry"—and returning to Emily, in the corner which he had found for her, with a vague sense of defeat.

Charles Cutman swilled his face in cold water according to his custom, and knelt down to say his prayers. He had said the same prayers

mechanically ever since he had first gone to school. They still included the honourable mention of aunts whom he had forgotten—even his grandfather was automatically recommended for mercy—though no one knew better than Charles, how little that recommendation was deserved. The entire catalogue had become a ritual in exactly the same sense as the locking and bolting of the front door. In a way, it locked and bolted himself, being part of the hundred and one little mechanical pieces of his life which caused him to continue as he was supposed to be—supposed to be, that is, by the Cutmans who were still living—and, especially, of course, by Emily.

He went into his bedroom, picking his way carefully in the dark, in case she should wake, and approached the bed.

Why did Emily always sleep with the eiderdown half over her face? So damned unhealthy!

He removed it very gently, very tenderly. Then, without a sound, he crept in beside her and putting out the light, lay listening to the insidious purring of the sea.

. . . . . .

A quarter of a century ago there had been adventure in the life of Charles Cutman—the adventure of uncertainty—even of improbability. A young man, settled through a lucky friendship, in the Chambers of a successful barrister who was, even

then, on the point of taking silk, he could see no reason to suppose that he would ever make a living at the Bar—much less a living which must suffice for three. There had been unexpected chances, friends in need, bits and pieces of incredible fortune, narrow squeaks which had come out the right way, a hundred and one unforesoon happenings which had built up the present Charles Cutman, Esq., Barrister-at-law, with a very permanent and substantial practice, solid enough to warrant a house in Wilton Crescent and all that that implies—but—somehow or other—without adventure any more. With the security of his present position he would like to have kept the almost intoxicating gamble, the gay optimism of his early days. Now there was little left to be optimistic about. Actually, that element in his life had ceased when he became engaged. He had been accepted by Emily and the last big thrill was behind him. The succeeding years, bringing change in the ideal that he had wooed, new burdens and new responsibilities, had found him always kind, always sympathetically efficient in his changed position. He was, as a matter of fact, perpetually paying back what he owed for the joyous moment of that original thrill.

There is a type of man, unimaginative and always suspicious of pioneer work in any form, dumbly grateful perhaps, for any little emotional excitement which comes his way, but accepting without question the ultimate and possibly dull develop-

ments therefrom. He believes his villa to be the finest in the row, and his sweet peas the finest in the land—as for his morals, his method of life, and his system of educating his young—these are the finest in the world. And, indeed, this is beyond question, for they are all that his world contains. This type of man is, luckily, in the majority. He is essential to the well-being and the stability of the universe. Unfortunately for himself, Charles Cutman was not of this kind. He was not, it is true, an imaginative man, and temperament would be the last misfortune with which to credit him, but his mind was sufficiently active to produce vague fits of uneasiness, such as that which the spectacle of the crumbling cliff had brought to birth. He never traced these to their origin. They generally came on in the evening and Charles was wise enough immediately to go to bed. He was a good sleeper and never dreamt of the worries of the day. To this discipline he had deliberately trained himself in his young and struggling days, for the habit of dreaming a day over again is one which tends to make the odds too big. So he never allowed the sun to go down upon his wrath. Indeed, he seldom knew what his wrath was about.

He is not, therefore, on this occasion, to be imagined as having gone through the aforesaid analysis of the waning thrill. He was merely puzzled at this sense of depression on the first evening of the holidays. Well, he argued, it may have

been the railway journey, or perhaps an earlier reaction than usual—he remembered that fearful holiday reaction which he had experienced as a boy, after the perfervid celebrations of the end of a term . . . or possibly it was his stomach. There is something very indigestible about a meal on a train. He would go to the chemist's and buy some salts in the morning. Excellent things—salts . . . then he would have a round on the links in the afternoon. With Peter Margett, perhaps . . . or better, a foursome, with old Weare and Loxbury. It was a mistake to overdo one's exercise at the beginning. There was the fourteenth hole to theorize about, all over again . . . it was a bogey five . . . absurd . . . he had never actually done it in four, himself . . . but that was not enough to prove anything and Peter's argument had been ridiculous. He'd show Peter why again, tomorrow. If one got a long drive away up beyond the cliff slope, and then took a cleek . . .

. . . . . .

Ten minutes later Charles had laid his cleek shot dead and holed out. Emily stirred uneasily and woke. Ah! she thought, of course—they were by the sea. Then she discovered that it was not the sea but Charles, snoring; a seraphic smile on his face. He had just told Peter about his three at the fourteenth.

"Adenoids," muttered Emily, "but it's too late now!" That was Emily.

CHAPTER II.

The Beach Hotel was very quiet; the little town was fast asleep. The world might have been dead save for the tireless purring of the obstinate little waves upon the shingle, rubbing away patiently at the pebbles, gradually making them all round and uniform, in Nature's tidy way. Of course, some of the bigger fellows, with great jagged edges and unreasonable knobs, took a great deal of argument before they came into line. But the waves murmured to one another 'stick to it—stick to it'—and then a bigger wave would come along—chock-full of encouragement, so that the sea never despaired—not even of the cliff.

Harold Cutman was the first to come down the next morning. He was at the moment going through a really vicious attack of health mania. He was morbidly and horribly healthy. Indeed, he was almost disappointed in the fact that cold water is not so cold in the summer. His bath had been a failure. However, he had stood on the beach in a coldish wind in his wet bathing dress and by dint of perseverance, had succeeded in getting properly chilled through, so that his attitude at the breakfast table was that of a virtuous Tarzan.

"Hello, sir!" he said to Gabriel Loxbury, who

was the next of the party to come in, "been in the sea?"

Loxbury regarded him with the faintly sarcastic smile which had been his greatest asset in life. It enabled him to make the most offensive remarks, and always to withdraw, in case of disaster, by saying they were meant in fun. He had known the Cutmans, the Margetts and the Weares ever since they had been young married couples, and he had offended them all three mortally, on an average, three times a year. Yet, somehow or other, he had always been forgiven, for except in the things which he said, he was of a kindly nature and in his way, rather disconcertingly wise, and he always remembered to send the children something extraordinarily well thought out, at Christmas; moreover, the wives were sorry for him—because he was a bachelor. It was an obsession with Emily Cutman, for instance, that the bedding in Loxbury's flat was in a permanent state of damp and corruption. And there was a kind of tradition that he was lonely—fostered, perhaps, by his reputation for cynicism. As a matter of fact, Loxbury probably had more and closer friends than any average man is entitled to, and it is very doubtful whether he had ever felt consciously uncomfortable in his life.

"The sea is for the young, Harold," he said, "like all boisterous things."

"Boisterous! Why it's like a mill pond," returned the young man. "Not a single wave to give

you a real shaking-up," he added regretfully.

Loxbury picked up the menu. "Have you studied this important question yet?" he asked.

"Certainly, I have," said Harold, "I'm as hungry as Tantalus—I'm going to have a couple of sausages and a fried egg!"

"You are as desperate as Tantalus too, then?" smiled Loxbury. "I think an egg—lightly boiled—for me. And I must ask for some red pepper! It counteracts an egg in a wonderful way."

A sort of indeterminate bustle, like a light wind through corn, signalled the entrance of Emily Cutman. She had a way of coming into any room as if about to attend a Cabinet meeting. Ever since the rearing of her one child she had seemed convinced that there must always be something extremely important for her to correct, or arrange for, or prevent. Her son was twenty-seven, but she had never for a moment regarded him as grown-up. As for Harold himself, he was very fond of his mother, and was moreover, kind by nature so that he never allowed her to see that he was alive to her rather absurd behaviour. She had a habit of speaking quickly and jumping from one train of thought to another without a signal of any kind. Consequently her conversation was somewhat difficult to follow and her husband made it a rule only to concentrate on the last sentence of any remarks she let fall. She smiled quickly to Loxbury and turned to Harold with a complete change of expression. To

one who did not know her she might now have been in a state of anxiety only to be occasioned by the certain imminence of some frightful disaster.

"Harold," she said, "you have been in the sea! I am quite certain that you are not dry!"

"Dry as a bone, mother!" he returned. "What's become of father?"

Emily, with a little jerk of the head, like a bird looking for food on a lawn, dashed off into another worry.

"Most annoying!" she said. "He forgot to pack his safety-razor. Of course, he has his ordinary one—it's been in his dressing-case for years—but I wouldn't let him use that. Never touched! Nobody knows what might be on it—Dr. Weare was talking about Streptococci only the other day—what large families they have, you know . . . but it's like Mr. Margett talking about finance. I can't contend with more than four noughts. Of course, if we'd had Jeyes' or something to wash it in—but, then we haven't—and it's probably septic now, or whatever it is in hospitals. So he's gone up the street in rather a temper, I'm afraid—but what could one do, Mr. Loxbury?—don't you think so?"

Loxbury had no very clear notion of what he was meant to think, so he contented himself with a non-committal nod and remarked: "Very much wiser."

"I don't know who packed the roll of rugs," went on Harold's mother, with another bird-like shake of the head. "I know it wasn't I. Did you,

Harold? Charles says he things Parkin did, but it's very unlike Parkin. We've had him for years—well, isn't it?"

Harold saw that he was addressed and rallied his senses. He realised that there had been some further disaster here.

"What has happened, mother"? he asked.

Emily dashed at her story again.

"If it was Parkin, someone will have to speak. So careless! Besides, look at the prices of things! It's not like the old days. Why, in my mother's time you could get quite a good one for seven-and-sixpence—less, if you didn't mind a common handle. Twenty-five and eleven I gave for mine—or rather, Charles did. It was a present of his, and of course that makes it worse. I never thought of that! I wonder if it *was* Parkin?"

She paused, convinced that she had made perfectly clear the fact that Charles' walking-stick, through careless packing, had been thrust through the silk of her parasol. Dr. Weare entered the room at this moment, his wife close behind him. He was fifty years old, and on his holiday, always looked more like a prosperous farmer than a doctor. The face, which, under his professional top-hat looked ordinarily healthy, took on the appearance of a red November sun in his holiday surroundings. He wore the most striking of golfing suits, with the most blatant of tassels appearing from underneath the tops of his stockings. A slight tendency to

corpulence which, in London and a morning coat, was considered merely to give him dignity, now seemed to reveal itself as a really stupendous paunch. He was proud of his bucolic disguise in the country, as if it was a kind of protective colouring, and he aided and abetted it in every way he could. Only his hands, which were delicate and nervous, betrayed the fact that he was not what he took so much trouble to appear. His wife was almost a complete contrast to him. Her figure had remained the same as it had been when she was a girl. A little thin, a little spare about the shoulders, with a well poised head and a pair of rather wonderful eyes. Her face had at one time been the perfect oval of one of the Florentine Madonnas, but her mouth was thin and the passage of time had rather enhanced this. Her eyes, however, remained the same, large and of a curious kind of blue which appeared sometimes as steely and hard, and at others as infinitely soft, yet never seemed actually to change at all. They were less like human eyes than two aqua-marines set in the brownish-gold of her long eyelashes. She reminded some people of Burne-Jones: others of Botticelli's calm and yielding women, others of the more subtle Leonardo da Vinci. To a stranger, the most noticeable thing about her was her amazing silence. She would sit in a mixed company where all manner of subjects were being discussed, laughed over, or debated even with acrimony, without once opening her lips. Her

hands would be folded on her lap, her head a little forward, but only her eyes seemed to be following the conversation. Whether Loveday Weare was bored on these occasions, or whether it was simply that she had nothing to say, none even of her friends had ever been able to decide. Religion, children, politics, Art, everyday life—no one knew what she thought of any of them. Cutman, indeed, had confided to Emily that it was his private opinion that Loveday Weare was simply a fool, but Emily, who was almost insanely loyal when an old friend was in question, had told him that his opinion merely showed that he had no imagination. On the other hand, it is difficult to imagine that Emily Cutman had very much insight into the character of Loveday Weare. But, of course, with women you never can tell . . .

As far as household matters were concerned, and the well-being of her husband, Mrs. Weare was every bit as efficient as Emily.

She was also passionately fond of dogs: altogether, rather a baffling personality.

"Well, here we all are again!" exclaimed the doctor. "I wonder what Whyticombe would do without us! And, upon my soul," he added, "I believe it's the same table as we all had last year."

"Yes, it is," answered Harold, "I don't know about anyone else, but I'm as hungry as a bird in a frost!"

"You've been in the sea already?" said Weare.

"And why not? Youth can afford to take risks!"

Loxbury smiled. "Do you think they could afford to take the risks, Owen, if they knew?" he asked.

"Knew what?" queried the doctor.

"That nature, like a first-class tailor, only insists upon the bill being paid when one is fifty!"

Emily Cutman broke in breathlessly. "That's why people call you a cynic," she said, shaking a finger at Loxbury. "Yes, they do! I don't know what you meant, but you couldn't really have meant it—that's what a cynic is—isn't it? Well, why say the things? That's what I am always telling Charles, though of course he's not a cynic. But on Sunday mornings he has the most extraordinary views about everything. But then men do. Oh, Harold, would you have sausages as well?"

This last, as Harold gave his order to the waiter. Emily had no idea that in the one sentence she had entirely blotted out from everyone's mind her preceding remarks. So it was that she went straight on with her peroration.

"That's what I always say about cynics, don't you, dear?"

Loveday Weare turned her great eyes on Emily, and nodded slowly. The silence of Mrs. Weare, thought Loxbury, was only completely understandable when she was dealing with Emily Cutman.

"Here's Charles," said the latter, as her husband appeared in the doorway, shaved and rosy, "let's start breakfast!" To Emily, her husband's appear-

ance was always a signal that whatever was in hand at the moment could go forward. She would never have thought, for a moment, of starting her breakfast without him. Charles said his "good-mornings" and took his seat, whereupon a breathless silence ensued. It was as though some sign was expected, the absence of which would prove a bitter disappointment to the people round the table.

"Well," said Charles at last, "here we all are again—same old room, same old table, same old people!" He paused. Evidently the expected had not yet happened. "It's a wonderful day, too," he added, and Harold started to smile. "What's the proverb?" went on his father. " 'Fine first day, fine all the way!' "

The doctor banged on the tablecloth childishly with his fork. "He's said it," he shouted, "he's said it!"

Mrs. Weare smiled at her plate. Emily turned eagerly to the doctor,

"Was there a bet about it?" she asked.

He nodded. "I had ten bob with Harold and a pound with Peter," he said triumphantly.

Charles turned to him. "May one ask, Owen," he said, with an assumption of enormous dignity, "what exactly one *has* said, to warrant the payment of these vast sums of money?"

"Why, the proverb, Dad," broke in Harold, "that's been your first remark here for the last three years!"

"Three? Seven or eight, rather!" amended the doctor.

"Has it?" said Emily. "Do you know I'd never really noticed it!"

"But then you know father so well, mother," Harold leant across the table to her. "You never notice anything he does because you're so used to him!"

Loxbury cut in suddenly. "Now, that really is cynicism," he said to Emily.

"I should not have called Harold a cynic," snapped Cutman. "He's past that stage by seven years! Peter Margett's very late!"

The fact that Weare and his boy and Margett had made a bet on his idiosyncrasies rather annoyed him. He knew that it was an unreasonable annoyance and hoped that no one noticed it. Of course, everyone did, except, equally, of course, Emily. But dear old Cutman! They all knew how easily annoyed he was, and how equally easily pacified.

Joan Margett who came in with her daughter, Alison, possessed an outward appearance which was uncompromisingly uninteresting. All her features seemed dull and without life, especially her mouth which somehow managed to produce words with less movement than appeared possible. Perhaps in compensation for this immobile manner, her hands and her method of using them in conversation were quite amazingly expressed. She came from the Highlands, and had inherited from some remote

ancestor an utterly irrational strain of almost savage imagination. She would, for instance, produce entirely unexpected emotional viewpoints of natural objects, which she would embody in some short, breathless sentence, so picturesque, so vivid that it seemed to her listeners as if it must be a quotation from a classic. But it never was, for Joan Margett had not read the classics. She possessed in her nature, this curious sense of colour—colour in everything—words, music, character, life. As a girl, she had written verse—written it because it had been a natural expression of her self—as natural as the movements of her hands. Then, in middle-age, she had realized that verse, which remained in little notebooks, locked up in the drawers of her bureau was just a trifle sterile. Moreover, Peter Margett, who was the editor of a Sunday paper, had once read some of them and, quite kindly, had stamped them as unmarketable.

Therefore, one winter afternoon, Joan had collected her notebooks and burnt them. Not, however, before she had recited many of her poems in a whisper to herself, accompanied by those vivid hands, and told herself that they were good. Still, they would never see the light and they were futile. So they died. The practical and the poetic were in equal parts in her nature. Since the funeral pyre of these early efforts had been consumed, she had written no more. It did not appear to her worth while. Still, she could not prevent those sudden

emotional word pictures which seemed every now and then to leap to her lips, like stars shooting down the sky to meet the horizon. She was no poseur, and, truth to tell, had she had time to think, she would probably never have given utterance to half the remarks which seemed to make everyone else silent and even uncomfortable. But the damage was always done before it could be stopped, and so Joan Margett had the reputation amongst her friends of being a little odd—much odder, for instance, than Loveday Weare, whom everyone privately regarded as a fool, which was really very unfortunate for her, since, if she had been a man, her silence would probably have been taken as an indication of great wisdom. But somehow women are never supposed to be wise, and of course, if you are just clever, you talk a great deal. . . .

Alison Margett was highly intelligent and extremely athletic. She would discuss quite adequately with her father the policy of his paper, and could remember accurately what she had read in its contemporaries. To Peter Margett, naturally, this appeared the best possible form of intelligence and he was extremely proud of his daughter, though, in truth, he knew little about her. But he made a point of asking her opinion upon matters of public interest in the presence of other people. If ever a question of Art was under discussion he would pay his wife the compliment of asking for her views, but Joan seldom rose to the bait. She had the natural

shyness of those who know they are apt to be betrayed into real emotion, and so she hated nothing so much as an argument. As for Peter himself, he was a very successful editor, and might from sheer ability, have become something really worth while, but for a deplorable trait in his nature which made him invent facts in support of his favourite theories—a trait which, having been in operation for thirty-odd years, had now left him sincerely convinced of these self-made facts and, on any general subject, entirely biassed and unreliable. But he was kind, jovial, and outside his own pet illusions, tolerant, and his club considered him an "awfully good fellow."

He came into the room now and joined the others at the breakfast table. Weare hailed him with a shout. "You've lost your money, Peter," he said.

"Good old Charles," chuckled Margett, "by the law of averages I made certain he'd miss it this year!"

"H'm!" grunted Charles. "By any law of probability you'd imagine Mrs. Weare would have burnt the doctor's ridiculous stockings before now!"

"Charles," said Emily, "that's very unkind—very unkind. I don't like the tassels, but then who am I? After all, if it gives pleasure to anyone to have tassels, why not? Besides, I daresay they are garters, really. Of course, if things are *quite* useless, only women ought to wear them, I suppose—though why, I can't quite see, can you?"

She turned quickly, in her bird-like way, upon Loxbury, who, unfortunately, had automatically ceased to listen the moment that Emily had started talking.

"Weare's stockings?" he queried, desperately recalling the thread of the conversation. "Isn't it a natural reaction to the spats which are part of his bedside manner?"

Loveday Weare's curiously low-pitched voice seemed to come from somewhere outside the group at the table.

"You may like it," she said, "or you may not like it: but it's no more silly than a tie round a collar."

Alison Margett broke the pause. "You wouldn't like a man without a tie," she said, "a naked stud is a horrible sight."

Mrs. Weare smiled at her and nodded. "Yes," she said slowly, "it's the same sort of idea that makes men want to cover up their braces . . . but I don't know that it is really so healthy an idea as everyone thinks!"

"You see," Loxbury broke in, "one's instinct is to cover up any article of clothing that is actually *doing* something."

'That's true,"' said Margett, "very true; caging in the engine; concealing the secret. Think of a clock! There's always something indecent about glass sides! Hide the works! It's an instinct!"

Peter Margett always seemed to carry on a conversation in headlines.

"But the works of a clock," interjected Joan Margett, "are hidden because of the dust . . . the dust," she repeated, as if to herself.

Vaguely everyone felt that there was something deep, something very well thought out behind her contribution, and it resulted in switching off that topic of conversation as one switches off an electric light.

Mrs. Margett was always finding that she had this effect, and she could never discover why. As a matter of fact she had always made the mistake of imagining that when men and women said things, they were expressions of considered conviction. Now she realized that she had again been the cause of what she privately had christened "nasty pocket of silence." Indeed, the bump of an aeroplane in an air-pocket seemed very comparable to the conversational bump of which she, so often, appeared to be the cause.

It was Dr. Weare who regained control. "Are you going to bathe this morning, Alison?" he asked, "or aren't you yet feeling sufficiently declimatized from Kensington?"

Alison laughed. "I like to keep my body ready for the sea at any minute," she said, "even in Kensington."

"Hear! Hear!" Harold put in, and his mother smiled at him as if she was entirely in accord with this athletic ideal, though in point of face, she was

just a little shaken at the notion of any woman mentioning her body at all.

Peter Margett nodded. "Yes," he said, "quite right. Always ready for anything—especially nature. A1 in C3 surroundings! Big idea—though Alison probably doesn't know it!"

"And moreover," broke in the purring voice of Loxbury, "it will make Peter's seat on the shingle seem so much more comfortable, to see his daughter looking thoroughly wet in the sea!"

"Charles Cutman laughed. "You're a horrible old cynic, Loxbury," he said, "and you've no right to say anything as true as that during the holidays!"

"True? Rubbish!—" Margett's staccato voice broke in. "Loxbury's world is a microcosm. It is bounded on the north by his valet, on the south by his Valet, on the east by a bottle of old Chambertin, and on the west by a glass of '65 Brandy. How should he know anything about the sea?"

"You'll never be anything else than a club-type, Loxbury," laughed Weare.

Emily Cutman intervened quickly. "That's very cruel, Dr. Weare," she said, "very cruel. I am sure you didn't mean it. I can't imagine how men can be so unkind to one another. But then, of course, they often fight, don't they? Well, of course, not our class of men, but they all have something in common. I suppose it's the animal: but perhaps it isn't—anyway, don't let's argue about

it! Men seem to argue for ever. It is such waste, don't you think?" She turned to Loveday Weare with this last question and that lady nodded very deliberately, then suddenly looked up.

"I don't know after all, dear," she said. "Perhaps, from our point of view, it lessens their powers of exhaustion!"

"Exhaustion?" Charles Cutman echoed the word, all of a sudden, like a twanged wire—then broke off, as sharply again, like the same singing wire when someone has placed a finger on it. Vaguely, like the unformed, elusive memory of a dream, that word recalled the mood of the night before. He could not even remember the emotion of that mood now, but the note had been struck which brought back a sense of some queer thing in himself which had to be hidden—like the braces and all those clothes which were actually doing things. He rose to his feet, cheerily.

"Well, well," he said, "who's for the beach?"

CHAPTER III.

"Of course," said Margett suddenly, "this must really be awfully bad for us—enervating—saps the tissues!"

He was lying on the beach with Cutman watching from under his hat the heat rising like a shimmering veil off the pebbles.

"Yes," answered Charles, "better to be on the Cliff—golfing."

"But we never play on the first morning," murmured the other.

"No, never," answered Charles. He propped himself up uneasily upon one elbow and looked down towards the water. Near the sea's edge a little group sat watching the bathers—Loxbury, and the women. Charles looked at the three parasols.

"What an extraordinary air of contentment," he said, "the back of a parasol seems to imply!"

"Ye Gods!" interjected Margett. "There's old Owen going into the water! Like a great red porpoise! And nobody laughs! Now, if they did that on the stage! . .

Cutman pulled his hat over his eyes and grunted.

"Weare's a damned old fool," he said, "he'll end by getting a stroke or something!"

"After all, he's a doctor," said the other.

"I daresay. I'm a barrister: but I may be the victim of litigation for all that, some day or other!"

"Rot, Cutman. After all your experience you could never bring yourself to write a cheque for a solicitor."

A rich deep voice broke in from behind them.

"Good morning, Mr. Cutman and Mr. Margett," it said, "welcome back again!"

"Morning, Willis," returned Cutman, "what kind of a season is it going to be?"

"About usual, sir," said the voice, and its owner seemed to coil himself into the pebbles besides them with all the grace of a snake in its native rock home.

Ted Willis was the doyen of the Whyticombe fishermen. That his name should have been Willis was a perpetual mystery, because on looking at him, it was perfectly obvious that he was a grandee of Spain of very high caste. Moreover, he was not like the majority of these men, one whose knowledge of the sea was bounded by the bay and the sailing capacity of his boat. The whole world had been his club for many years before he had decided that there was no more adventure for one of his years, and had settled down at Whyticombe, where he had been born, with the curious homing fatalism of his southern blood. No one knew very much about his birth—after all, it was an event of nearly seventy years ago—but there is no doubt that it was not lawful. And when you looked into his face with its high forehead, its thousands of tiny wrinkles on the

brown skin, its still iron-grey, rather drooping, moustache and its whiter hair, with the deep-set, brooding brown eyes that could yet fire with enthusiasm on occasions—then you had no doubt whatever that somewhere away back in the pedigree of Ted Willis, you would come across a very fine gentleman, strutting the quarter-deck of a Spanish galleon, fighting with hopeless courage that God-sent storm of 1588, and beaching his quivering ship, perhaps on the Sanscombe rocks, round the corner to the west, over the great white cliff. But, even without looking at his face, you could feel that there was some strain of greatness in the fisherman by the way in which he sat unbidden beside his superiors without giving offence, and by the tone of the 'sir' which he never failed to use in addressing them.

If you walk along the beaches of South Devon you will find many of these long-shore aristocrats, but you may fare far before you find one whose intellectual ability matches the coat-of-arms which is stamped upon his face. Willis had no library in the little cottage in Boniton Street where he lived; he had, it is very possible, never read half-a-dozen books in his life; but he had lived nearly seventy years with a brain behind those dark eyes, which transformed them into microscopes, and forty of those years had been spent with the rover ticket of a sailor on the world's promenades. Moreover, he could talk—talk, indeed, when the fit was on him, in a way which, until the spell was over, made all

the books of the universe seem lifeless and without hope. The truth is that Ted Willis might have been a great success—as a novelist, or a sailor, or a father—or in any of those occupations where imagination is essential to counteract despair, except for the fact that he was divinely lazy and had never been in any hurry to try to cheat Death by pretending to have achieved something before his visit.

"Are we going to have a fine August, Willis?" asked Margett, passing his tobacco over to the fisherman.

"The first half should be pretty well," came the answer, as the fisherman filled his pipe. "What you want to do, I should do quickly. It is always a good rule. Thank you, sir," he added, as he returned the pouch.

Charles Cutman waved a hand towards the cliff. "The white cliff's gone a bit more since last year, hasn't it?" he asked.

"Yes, sir," answered Willis, "I'm wondering which will go first; the cliff or I!"

"Rot, Willis," said the Editor heartily, "there's another twenty years in you yet!"

"Maybe twenty years," returned the fisherman, "or maybe twenty minutes—or even seconds. The same as the old cliff. Who knows how far she is undermined? Who knows how far he himself is undermined?" He stretched out a muscular brown arm towards the notice board at the rock's edge.

"You see that sign, sir?" 'This cliff is dangerous'. It might be a good thing, don't you think, if some of us could put a sign like that by our own sides?" He paused. "And not only for Death," he added slowly.

"For what, then?" asked Cutman, with the slightest of rasps in his voice.

"Oh, lots of things, sir," returned the old man. "The dimming of enthusiasms, the beginnings of regrets, the moment when one knows one is just waiting for the end of things, and one doesn't care enough to do anything more than wait. The young fellows with their newly bought boats, sir, they break their hearts if the mackerel don't come into the bay, and that's what they should be doing. When the day comes that they shrug their shoulders and say 'tain't any use bothering'—then I say 'tis time to put up the notice 'This cliff is dangerous'!"

"Willis, you're an old fool!" said Margett cheerfully. "You're trying to persuade yourself that youth is the only thing that matters, just because you haven't got it!"

"But I have got it, sir," rejoined the fisherman. "It isn't the years that count; it's the joy you find in 'em!"

"Then why the devil do you want to put up the notice board?" queried Cutman irritably.

"For my own good, sir—that's all!"

The old man rose slowly, puffing at his pipe.

"Mr. Harold will be letting me know when he feels like a piece of fishing?" he asked.

Cutman nodded. "He wouldn't go out with anyone else, Willis—and you know it."

"Exactly, sir," replied the fisherman. "That's what I meant about the joy you find in 'em."

A small fussy man in a blazer bustled up to him.

"I want you to take me and my family out in your boat this afternoon!" he began importantly.

"I'm not taking her out to-day," said the old man.

"Tut, nonsense, man," retorted the other. "I'm told yours is the best boat in the place."

"So she is. But I'm not taking her out to-day, sir. I'm sorry." He bowed with a curious grace and moved away along the beach folowed by the puzzled glare of the little man in the blazer.

"There will still be Emperors," murmured Peter Margett, "when all the world is one republic."

The little man in the blazer muttered something about "confounded modern democratic principles," and started stumbling across the stones towards the spot where a group of the younger fishermen stood, idly watching the bathers and calculating what this summer season was likely to produce in the way of compensation for spending the winter on the same beach. Alison Margett, her damp hair hanging down her back, suddenly appeared before her father.

"Look here, Dad," she began, briskly, "we all

want to go for a picnic this afternoon—that is, I and Harold do, and mother and Mrs. Weare are quite willing—what do *you* think?"

"Isn't a picnic rather strenuous for the first afternoon?" said her father.

"Well, that's what Mrs. Cutman says, but I've just been telling her it's only a tradition."

"H'm!" grunted Margett, "and now you've been sent to see whether your father will defy tradition or not?"

Alison laughed. "It's hardly a tradition," she said, "it's a sort of idea that's grown without being asked!"

"We'll go," answered her father, lying back on the pebbles lazily. "You can tell us where we are going at lunch."

"Good egg," returned the girl, and turned down the beach to break the news to the three elder ladies that there was now no hope of a reprieve.

Cutman dug his stick into the stones. "Weak, Peter, weak!" he said. "You know you don't want to go for an infernal picnic—and, damn it all, this is supposed to be the wage-earners' holiday!"

"You musn't call a picnic infernal, Charles," returned the Editor. "It's as bad as putting up the notice that Ted Willis was talking about!"

"Rot!" said the other. "Here we are lying in a sort of Turkish bath, getting more enervated every second. No wonder we don't feel too strenuous!"

Peter Margett laughed softly. "Comfortable

Doctrine," he answered, "blame nature. Truth is, we're just at the age when we are always hoping to get enthusiastic about yesterday's excitements—always hoping for a miracle! You can't deny it!"

There was no answer, and the editor playfully jabbed his companion in the ribs.

"Well," said Cutman, irritably, "I'm not denying it."

"Once we liked picnics," murmured Peter. "Romance, Adventure—curious sense of I don't know what—all really the same idea though—vague notion that something different might happen if you had your tea in an unusual place. Now we know that nothing unusual will ever happen. We don't think of the jam any longer, we think of the wasps buzzing round it. Both points of view equally pathetic, I suppose."

"What the devil are you talking about, Peter?" asked Cutman, who had not been listening.

"It might make an article," said the editor. "Ah!" he broke off, "they are going back to lunch!"

They both rose and went down the beach to meet the little party.

"I've been telling everybody it's a mistake," panted Emily Cutman, a little in advance of the others as they came up the beach. "Rushing at things is such a pity, don't you think? I know Loveday agrees with me, if only she would speak. Well, isn't it trying? I mean to say, why were tongues invented? Harold is such an overwhelmer;

he brushes everything aside. Charles used to be just the same, didn't you, Charles? But I don't suppose you remember. Why, when we were engaged, Mr. Margett—however, that's not the point. Now, Charles," she said finally, "you must admit you don't agree at all!"

At this point the others arrived.

"Don't listen, Mr. Cutman!" cried Alison, quickly. "Don't listen to a word of it! The whole thing's settled!" She slid a strong arm round Emily's shoulders and looked at her with a kindly maternal smile.

"Shock tactics, Charles," said Loxbury; "it is the method of the younger generation. We've got to go!"

"Why shouldn't we go?" asked Cutman, just a little too violently, "I should enjoy a picnic very much!"

Harold gave vent to an ironical cheer.

"Why the devil," said his father explosively, "should it be taken for granted that I shouldn't enjoy it?"

"Hear! Hear!" came the hearty voice of the doctor.

"But Berrilow's car only holds four," said Emily. "And you can't walk, dear! It's nearly six miles to Testleigh Bottom where they want to go."

"Can't walk!" roared the barrister. "Can't walk? Do you think I'm a nonagenarian, Emily?"

"Charles and I will walk together," put in Margett.

"And Harold can walk with me," said Alison.

"We'll give father half-an-hour's start," suggested Harold.

"I shall walk with you, Charles," said Weare. "Do us a world of good!"

"And I," remarked Loxbury, "will court eternal shame by travelling in the car—but," he added softly, "I shall score heavily at breakfast to-morrow morning, and I will play the best ball of the three of you afterwards!"

"Very well," returned Cutman doggedly, "and for half-a-crown a hole!"

He finished the walk along the asphalt to the hotel at a considerable pace and, after lunch, fought down an intense desire for sleep. When the car, starting an hour later, caught up the walkers on the way to Testleigh Bottom, Charles Cutman would have given a large fortune to accept the proffered lift by squeezing in between Loxbury and the driver. But a sense of pride, which he himself knew to be ridiculous, forbade it, and he was not in the least comforted by the suspicion of an ironic smile on the lips of Loxbury as the car went on in a whirl of dust—nor, indeed, by the inaudible but obvious volubility of Emily who, as her husband perfectly well realized, was explaining, quite sympathetically, of course, his more private infirmities to Joan Margett and Loveday Weare. His only consola-

tion was that Peter Margett's remarks were becoming more snappy every moment. Evidently Peter was suffering too. The Doctor, though he wheezed like a leak in a steam-pipe up the hills, preserved a perfect good nature and cheeriness. Charles found himself regarding Weare balefully, and persuading himself that this behaviour on the part of the doctor was merely a blind. Of course he must be in a state of misery—carrying all that weight . . .

They turned into the steep lane at the top of which lay the bracken-carpeted clearing beside Testleigh Woods, which had become, by tradition, the goal of this particular expedition. Here the tea would be laid out—here somebody would spend twenty minutes trying to make a fire burn from sodden twigs—here, finally, the methylated spirit stove would be mobilized amid laughter and disappointment—and here, after a fly and wasp haunted meal, they would all, as a ritual, walk to the edge of the bracken and look across Wiveshampton and Cowleigh and Daggonsbourne and Northstoke to the grey pinnacles over on the horizon, which it was a point of honour with the Londoners to describe as Tors.

Moreover, Cutman's tired and disgusted brain reminded him, Emily would say: "That's the moor!" in the particularly awestruck whisper which she would equally certainly use to the sidesman in Church next Sunday.

At this point in his reflections, Charles applied the brake with a jerk. He was drifting into another ridiculous mood: absurd! He pointed out some honeysuckle to Margett who remarked that the scent of honeysuckle in a room was overpowering. The doctor, however, scrambling up the hedge clumsily and scratching his hands heedlessly, possessed himself of a sprig which he stuck jauntily in his cap. Margett sneered openly.

"Poor old Weare," he said, "trying to pretend he's a boy!"

The Doctor scrambled back into the lane, not in the least put out.

"Faith and pretence, my dear fact-merchant," he said, "are two of the most potent medicines in the world!"

As they plodded up the stony lane, Charles Cutman was beginning to derive a real satisfaction from the evident discomfort of the Editor. Indeed, it is possible that he would have arrived at the appointed spot in every bit as genial a frame of mind as Owen Weare, save for the fact that, about five hundred yards from the gap in the hedge beyond which lay the little clearing, Harold and Alison, pink and hot, but fit for another ten miles, passed them exuberantly and with triumph. Moreover, Harold, in a mistaken attempt to be "nice" to his father, shouted over his shoulder as he passed:

"Good for you, Governor—we only did it on the post!"

But somehow the note in the voice, which showed how very certain Harold had been that he and Alison would 'do it'—and the sight of the two swinging arrogantly through the gap ahead of them—flung Cutman back into the state of depression from which the misery of Margett had temporarily lifted him. Owen Weare had not missed the flying gusts of expression on his face.

"Charles," he puffed, "you are finding the art of being middle-aged a very complicated affair. What the devil are you going to do when you're old?"

As they turned through the gap, Cutman with an effort twisted his mind back into a light vein.

"Dry up, Owen," he said, with the assumed note of a schoolboy. "What about you?"

The Doctor laughed. "I?" he echoed. "Why, my dear Charles, I shall die like everyone else—when my heart fails!"

Margett seemed to wake up all of a sudden.

"Good phrase!" he said earnestly. "Snappy! Double meaning, with mixture of sentiment, too! 'When does your Heart fail?'— Short third column article! Why not?" He paused and turned to Weare. "Write it!" he said.

"H'm!" remarked Cutman, gloomily. "The essential point is that it's only necessary to keep up one's heart when one is fighting something or other."

The Doctor nodded. "Quite right," he said, "you think you've come to a point when you simply

must know about things, Charles, eh? A sort of freshman at your second university. I'll not try to be superior," he added simply. "It's a condition we all come to. It's like influenza, but nobody knows the germ. I've felt the symptoms myself—a sort of damnable longing to—

'hear, know, and say
What this tumultuous body now denies!'

I don't know who wrote that but it's quite true."

Charles Cutman looked at the doctor and nodded. Wonderfully understanding fellow, old Weare!

The Editor was breathing very fast. It was his method of 'pointing' like a retriever.

"Rupert Brooke," he said quickly, pigeon-holing the doctor's quotation from sheer force of habit.

Cutman, wrapt in a haze of self-analysis, snapped angrily. "What the devil difference does that make?" he asked.

The doctor merely nodded. Margett took the nod as an acknowledgment of information received—Charles detected in it a sympathy for his outburst against the necessity for the universal label.

As a matter of fact, Owen Weare was, in spite of his bucolic appearance, an exceedingly diplomatic fellow. He knew quite well that it is very difficult to detect a bedside manner, outside a bedroom.

CHAPTER IV.

Harold and Alison enjoyed the picnic—not as much as they had expected to, of course, but still, they enjoyed it. It had, though neither of them had been morbid enough to work the thing out, appeared rather like a play which has run for many nights. Everybody had said the same things that had been said at this particular picnic for years. Loxbury had been mildly satirical and Emily had laughed protestingly at his cynicisms. Loveday Weare had, as far as could be remembered, said nothing at all and Joan Margett had said things unexpected and shattering to the commonplace.

The last of the meal had been despatched and the party had walked down to the edge of the gorse and looked across the well known and now curiously uninspiring view. Moreover, according to ritual Emily Cutman had become sentimental. Scenery always caused her to think violently about God, and on these occasions she had to be dealt with tactfully, since thinking about God invariably brought her to the edge of tears and general distress. If, as her husband, in a fit of irritation, had once done, you asked her what on earth there was to cry about in the beauties of nature and a religion which, if it is meant to be anything, is meant to be comforting, she would say vaguely, "it all seems so sad", and relapse into an orgy of sniffs and little sobs, to be

followed by a violent sick headache. The only person who appeared to understand this irritating emotion was, curiously enough, Loveday Weare, whom no one, not even her husband, ever remembered to have seen shed tears in her life.

"You see," she had once said to Joan, after an uncomfortable episode of the kind, "it really is sad . . . as Emily sees it. She wants to understand why it's lovely, and she tries to make out that it's because God made it. Then she realizes she doesn't understand God either, and of course she wants to cry; it *is* very unsatisfactory for her, isn't it? Still, she cries and gets exhausted and forgets the scenery and God because of her headache, and so gets perfectly all right again. You and I look on the view as probably the result of an earthquake and Emily's tears as the gift of God. The result is we can't cry and I daresay half our lives are dreadful to us!"

Joan Margett had nodded and answered.

"When you *do* speak, Loveday, you come very near talking like limpid water running over coloured stones. I love looking through clear water."

On the present occasion, however, Emily had been successfully headed off tears by Harold's discovery that his unemptied pipe had set his coat on fire. This disaster had the advantage of making her forget all about God without the distressing anaesthetic of a headache, and after prophesying disjointedly any number of soul-curdling accidents to which Harold was certain to fall a victim, she

arrived at the spot where they had eaten their tea in a perfectly happy frame of mind.

As for Harold and Alison, they wandered off on a walk of their own, talking like a couple of undergraduates, of sport, and the pursuit of happiness, and colour, and line and a million and one things which they knew nothing of, and which are, of course, the only things worth arguing about. And they ejaculated 'rot' and 'rubbish' at each other's statements and walked, again like two youths, at least two yards apart all the way. Meanwhile Emily hinted that "perhaps they saw something in one another" and "it wouldn't be a bad thing, would it?" and "it was rather nice, wasn't it, to see two young things falling in love and going off sentimentalizing?"

At which point she very nearly tumbled headlong into tears again and warned Loxbury very sternly that "no one was to dare to joke about it in front of the dear children."

And the curious thing was, that although this picture of Heloise and Abelard wandering hand in hand through the bracken, wrapt in a rosy aura of dawning Romance, brought to birth by giant strides in the wonderful scene set by the stage manager who built Devonshire, was at the furthest pole from the truth, yet, the essential fact remained that through the more modern medium of refuting each other's arguments and calling each other fools, whereby discovering that there was something about

each of them that was worth criticism, Harold and Alison were actually falling in love.

But Cutman, to whom the incidents of the picnic had appeared amazingly—even alarmingly—staler than usual, and whose efforts at enthusiasm had not even succeeded in convincing himself, now felt his mood heavy upon him, and under the plea that he was sleepy and was going to sit in the shade, walked up to the big hedge under Testleigh Woods, some quarter of a mile away, and sitting under its shadow and tilting his hat over his eyes, fell to black thoughts.

The countryside seemed so provokingly, so triumphantly peaceful. The bracken bent easily and gracefully before a soft, caressing wind. A rabbit, not ten yards away from him, ran out on the grass, looked round enquiringly and settled down to the evening meal. From the hedge, behind him, there came a continuous gentle rustle which seemed the outward and visible sign of a life unproblematic and unquestioned in its design. In the wood itself there seemed the deep-noted silence of content. Were only humans the butt and jesting-point for all these hideous problems of existence? Was it possible that Master Rabbit, methodically absorbing his supper, was a prey to hideous doubts about his love and loyalty to Mistress Rabbit, irritatingly asleep perhaps beneath that very hedgerow? Incredible!

And to Cutman at this moment, there appeared

nothing more obvious than that the philosophy of pig-happiness was the most desirable. He sat very still, unnaturally still considering that he was exceptionally wideawake. His stillness, indeed, was akin to the rigidity of fear, for Charles was fighting hard against a very horrible thought . . . the thought that he hated Emily, after thirty years. He shut the door violently against the unwelcome visitor but he could not close his ears to the perpetual hammering of the door knocker. The very presence of the idea—which he put down frantically to bodily indispositions invented for the purpose, made him feel an outcast—someone whom dear old Owen and bluff Peter Margett would not care to associate with, did they really know what manner of man he was. And yet . . . another startling idea . . . did those two also feel like him, every now and then? He pondered on the thought and dismissed it, feeling more than ever an outsider.

A sound, slight enough in itself, but different enough in its character to cause Charles to turn his head, came from the hedge on his left. Something appeared to be agitating the leaves somewhat too violently for the gentle summer wind. Charles watched the bending branches with interest. A fox, perhaps . . . no. A fox would have nosed him. Now what on earth was coming through that hedge so cautiously?

Incredibly without noise, or so it seemed to the town-bred perceptions of the barrister, the figure

of a man detached itself from the thick hedge and slid into the fern and thick grass beneath it. There was something familiar about the back view which Charles obtained of this apparition. Not in the clothes, for they were really rather peculiar. Navy blue seamen's trousers bound round below the knee with puttees of stained calico, arranged in a way which might well have caused the death of a sergeant-major in almost any regiment. The coat seemed unnecessarily long and full—indeed, on the left side it bulged right out in an absolutely unaccountable fashion. On the head was the relic of what had been a Homburg hat—crown and brim stained by sweat and sun, and ribbon gone so many years since, that there remained not even the lighter line where it had been.

It was the back of a brown neck and the beginning of a head of rebellious white hair that seemed so baffling in its familiarity and Charles was still puzzling over the problem when the man turned suddenly and caught sight of him.

"I should have sensed you, sir," said the apparition, in soft liquid tones. "Must be, I'm getting old."

"What the devil are you doing out here, Willis?" asked Cutman.

The fisherman looked up and down the hedge, and his keen eyes seemed to search all the points of the compass. There was no one in sight.

"Poaching, sir," he explained simply. "It is a

pity I should have made port just here, for you're a lawyer and 'tis your business to misunderstand a poacher."

"I'm not in Chambers, Willis," smiled the barrister. "What have you in your pocket?"

"A good dinner, sir," replied the fisherman, "and a couple of rabbits as well." He hesitated, as one apologising for hunting small game. "There are relations, sir," he explained, "with whom it pays to keep in, as it were."

Cutman nodded. "There are always relations," he said.

The old man settled down beside him on the bank, carefully arranging his coat so that it appeared quite normal in its proportions.

"Of course," began Willis, "I might defend my poaching in Lord Testleigh's woods by talking to you, sir, about socialism and the rights of men. Indeed," he added reminiscently, "I have been amongst most happy and respectable savages whose entire peace of mind would have been scuppered by the idea of personal property—that was in the Pacific, sir," he added. "Perhaps if there had been sufficient fresh water we'd not have cared so much for those savage chaps . . . but they were damned obliging to us, sir."

He broke off, accepting Cutman's tobacco pouch.

"Still, I don't poach from conviction, sir," he went on. "Lord Testleigh's land belongs to Lord Testleigh, and the pheasants and the rabbits in his

woods belong to Lord Testleigh too, so I'm a thief—and there's no defence for that, sir. Indeed," he added, "there's no defence for most of my life, if it comes so far."

"Nor mine," muttered Cutman, remembering the thoughts about Emily which had been knocking for admittance to his mind.

"But there's a sense of adventure in the woods, sir," the old man continued. "A sort of making the dying fire glow, if you understand me—even in the getting of a bird or two and a silly rabbit. To a lawyer, sir, that'll be a poor enough defence, but . . . when you're an old man, you've got to grab adventure where you can find it."

Cutman was silent, revolving the old fisherman's crystal-clear immorality in his mind, comparing it with the muddy morals of which he had been making pies in his own case.

"I'll not deny," the gentle voice of Ted Willis broke in, "that sitting here by you isn't an idea at disguise of mine—not that it isn't a pleasure and an honour, sir—but there was a keeper chap away back who heard more than he had need of, and no one could suspect you, sir, of sitting here under the hedge, talking away to a thief!"

"Look here, Willis," said Charles indignantly, "you know perfectly well I don't regard you as a thief!"

The old man looked at him, smiled, then broke into a little laugh. "I'd rather you did, sir," he

said, "and cared to talk to me all the same!"

"Very well, then," returned Charles, "I will. Why," he added irritably, "you seem to regard me as hopelessly respectable!"

He had a wild, instantly crushed desire to tell Ted Willis how far divorced from respectability his thoughts had been, at the moment of discovery.

"Respectable people, sir," said the fisherman slowly, "are the salt of the earth, as they call it. Where would we wild things be if it weren't for them?" (It was like Willis, thought Cutman, to include him, out of compliment, amongst the 'wild things'.) "Every man of us who feels a kind of rebel jumping inside him like a child on the way, ought to go on his knees and thank the good God for respectable folk. They are . . . " he hesitated, searching for the word. "There's a word I'm looking for, sir," he went on, "something that goes round and round and keeps things steady, so long as it doesn't stop!"

"Gyroscope?" queried Cutman.

The old man nodded. "That's the word, sir," he said. "Respectable folk are the gyroscope for all of us. You see," he added thoughtfully, as he pressed down the tobacco in his pipe, "Lord Testleigh and I both rely on a policeman in the end. He feels comfortable in the notion that he's looked after, and I . . . well, truthfully, sir, I'd not get so much zip out of this, if I didn't know I might get locked up!"

He paused, cocking his head sideways with a movement quite startling in its resemblance to that of an animal. Yet Charles had heard nothing.

"That's the keeper-fellow," he said, in a low voice. "He's tracked me down this far—'tis a brainier chap than I'd reckoned!" He stopped and leant back against the bank, his ear almost touching the ground. Some seconds elapsed in what seemed to Cutman complete silence. Then the old man raised his head and chuckled. "He's at fault," he said, "he's gone away along. South, he's moving: he'll never find the trail again now."

"I didn't hear a sound." Charles Cutman's voice had a ring of astonishment in it, which was almost childish.

"Ah, sir," returned the other, "you didn't have to. You'll hear, no doubt, many sounds in your own life which my ears would be deaf to. That's nature, sir, don't you think?"

Charles nodded. "I daresay it is," he answered, "and I daresay one hears a lot of sounds which don't exist."

Willis rose and took up his stick. The note of longing and self-persuasion in his companion's voice had not escaped him.

"There comes a time in our lives, sir," he said, "when lot's o' queer questions come up over things we've lived with unheeding for years. There's two ways of facing 'em, sir. You can stick 'em away behind you and pretend you've forgotten 'em—

that's one way. But it doesn't make it easier to die a man's death at the end. Or you can answer 'em, sir. And that's kill or cure."

Charles looked at the old man, standing straight and clean against the sky, and felt, all of a sudden, a complete intimacy between the two of them.

"Well, Willis," he asked, "when your time came, what did you do?"

The fisherman smiled ever so slightly. "I was a coward, sir," he returned, "I've had to keep 'em locked away ever since, an' persuade myself that the keys got lost. But I'm thinking to myself I'll find it under the pillow, the last time I take to my bed!"

"Rot, Willis, you're no coward. Why did'nt you try the other way?"

"I was a fool, sir: I wouldn't gamble on a miracle happening!" he started slowly down the hedgerow.

"He'd be a fool who would gamble on a miracle," returned Cutman, sourly. "They don't happen."

The old man turned sharply. "Don't believe that, sir," he said. "They do happen. They happen almost whenever you're in real need of 'em. Yes, sir, real queer unearthly miracles! Wise men know that, sir, but the fools don't find it out till they are old and the time's gone past. I was a fool!"

He took off his stained shapeless hat with a careless grace and was fifty yards down the hedge before Cutman realized that he wanted very much to go

on talking. Then, as the fisherman took himself and his personality round a bend and out of sight, the barrister pulled himself together with a jerk. Queer superstitions, these old chaps had! Really it wouldn't have been very dignified to have been discovered talking seriously to old Willis! Confound it! A little more and he might have been saying things to a fisherman which . . . the mere idea made Cutman feel quite hot and nervous at his escape. He walked down towards the picnic party again, bracing himself back into a state of healthy heartiness. He found, on arrival, that everything had been packed up and that he was generally suspected of having absented himself in order to avoid his share of the labour. Charles entered into this joke, developed heavily by Peter Margett, with an exaggerated heartiness which might have told any keen observer that he found no mirth in it himself. He was, as a matter of fact, pondering all the time on the extraordinary freak of nature which always made holiday-time the breeding ground for unpleasant and upsetting reflection. There was a good deal to be said for having no time for anything; though this again would come under Willis' definition of cowardice. And here was Emily defending his supposed laziness by appealing on the ground of his age—a word she seemed to use as synonymous with 'infirmity'. Loxbury, with that infernally cynical twist of the lips, which Cutman believed the fool thought fascinating, was proposing to give up

his seat in the car and Emily was approving the idea. Maddening!

"No!" he found himself shouting suddenly. "I'm going to walk home! Why the devil not? I'm going to walk home with Weare!"

"Of course, dear," said Emily, a little alarmed at his outburst. "Of course, if you'd like to——"

"At any rate," broke in the voice of Loxbury, "he'll be walking back with a doctor!"

Owen Weare smiled at him.

"You're disgracefully lazy, Loxbury," he said, "and disgustingly selfish. One of these days you'll get diabetes, I expect. But believe me, we couldn't bear to see a picture like you out of its frame, and your frame is wheels! As for Charles walking back with a doctor, it's much more likely to be a case of 'physician, heal thyself' than anything else."

Peter Margett burst into the conversation with a rush.

"Loxbury fell in love with himself at the age of twenty-two," he snapped, "and he's been faithful ever since. Nobody knows why. It's one of those inexplicable things, like somebody else's marriage."

"Dear me," said the Bachelor, "what an interesting fellow I must be! I wonder how long it will be before the young people come back and give us leave to start the return journey?" He turned to Cutman. Ah, Charles," he went on, "you've missed our interesting speculations about Harold and Alison!"

The soul of Charles surged within him.

"Ye Gods!" he said bitterly, "don't tell me you've all been planning another marriage!" He could have bitten the words out of his tongue before the sentence was finished, but it was too late. He rose and walked down to some gorse bushes under pretence of lighting his pipe away from the wind.

Emily broke the silence.

"Cream!" she whispered loudly. "I saw him eat two cut rounds! It's amazing how soon cream seems to curdle inside Charles!"

Cutman heard her and cursed softly. Owen Weare was looking at him out of the corner of his eye. Joan Margett rose briskly.

"Let's carry the baskets back to the car," she said.

The three men went off with them, shepherded by Emily, full of all manner of possible disasters to jugs and cups. Joan and Loveday were left alone. The latter was gazing over the bracken towards the now hazing hills of North Devon.

"Can't you feel it, Joan?" she whispered.

"Like a cyclone coming up?" asked the other.

"Yes—a cyclone that's been growing for years: and, not only his!" Loveday Weare jerked a finger toward's Cutman's back.

"Ours?" queried Joan. Her companion bent her head as if to the storm which was not yet upon them.

"Men!" she murmured, half contemptuous, half caressing. "Men! So obstinately big and so need-

lessly strong! And so . . . so pitifully little! And they say we don't know children because we have not borne one!" She laughed softly. "Well, she added, "the storm's coming. Their hands will be on the wheel and ours have got to be over them . . . or else . . ."

"Or else . . . ?" prompted Joan. The other shook her head.

"That vision's finished," came the quaint answer, as Loveday Weare relapsed into the silence which to most, even of her intimates, was the label of her personality.

CHAPTER V.

The car had started back before Alison and Harold had returned. Emily Cutman, who, under any other circumstances would have considered them lost and in some imminent danger, now being convinced that they were engaged in falling in love with one another, apparently imagined that, in such a case, Providence turned itself into a kind of supernatural Cook and Son, who could be relied upon to see that they reached their destination in safety. At any rate, Emily allowed herself to be driven back to Whyticombe quite happily, much to the surprise of Charles who, on the non-appearance of his son, fully expected that he would have to spend half-an-hour persuading Emily that the theory of chances was against Harold being dead.

As a matter of fact, the boy and girl, who differed keenly on every conceivable topic, had drifted into an argument which had increased in bitterness and invective, until all thoughts of time and place had been forgotten. It appeared that Harold considered the limitation of families to be immoral. Alison, whose method of arguing was the extremely disconcerting one of firing off statistics like a Maxim gun, had rained these intellectual shells upon what she called his "Waterloo vintage prejudice."

Harold had found his own arguments vague and illusory, though he remained convinced of his point of view, and the result of this was, inevitably, that he became very angry with Alison and she with him, so that they had passed the south corner of Testleigh Woods and were striding steadily in the wrong direction, some ten miles from home, before the battle broke down from sheer exhaustion and Harold discovered that they did not know in the least where they were.

"Look here," he said suddenly, "we're lost!"

"We can go back the same way," answered the girl.

"Can you find the woods?"

Alison swung round.

"Well, of course I can," she said, and stopped. "How absurd," she went on, "surely you remember where we turned off?"

Harold shook his head.

"I haven't the least idea," he returned. "Confound it! How awkward! And it will be getting dark soon."

Something in his tone told the girl that he was not merely afraid of the added difficulty of finding the way by night.

"Good Heavens, Harold!" she laughed. "You don't mean to say that you're thinking of a scandal! How deliciously comic! Really, with your ideas that everyone should have millions of babies, and that the Church's benediction is necessary before

two people can be alone in the dark, what will you be like in twenty years' time! About 1921, I suppose!"

"You're a little idiot, Alison," he returned easily, "or you'd know that more harm has been done by what people say than will ever be done by what they do!"

"I doubt it," said the girl, pugnaciously, "but there's no time to argue. I see I must get you home before sunset or you'll be miserable."

"Funny," said Harold, with an affectation of extreme weariness, "you've no idea how tiring you up-to-date girls become. The strain of keeping up your desperate characters is so painfully obvious."

"All right, Wyndham," came the answer, "if this is your long speech of fatherly advice: you ought, of course, to be doing it over my shoulder from the back of a chair, but, never mind, I'm ready!" She composed herself irritatingly, as if for a harangue, folding her hands meekly, and looking up into Harold's face with what was a very good imitation of the stage ingenue's 'sweet and trustful' smile. In spite of his annoyance, Harold found himself admiring her eyes—not strictly beautiful, of course . . . just grey eyes . . . but rather a nice shape; awfully honest . . . fighting eyes. Harold had known Alison nearly twenty years, but he never remembered noticing the shape of her eyes. Now there seemed something about her quite new. In the few seconds during which he was looking

down at her mock-meekness, he tried to find out what it was. No . . . not beautiful, not even pretty—well, what was it? He knew her character well enough: 'independence'—you could almost describe her in the one word. But what was it about her face? She seemed all of a sudden so . . . so "clean"! There she stood, an absolute monument to fearless self-reliance, and yet Harold felt a wave of amazing tenderness for her. How was this athletic, statistic-primed young creature able to inspire such an emotion? . . .

"Don't be an ass, Alison," he said, almost pleadingly. "We can't stand here talking for ever!"

"Then let's go on!" said the girl. "This lane must lead somewhere!"

That was like Alison, he thought, as tireless in her optimism as she was in her body. Rather a wonderful companion, really . . .

His mind became a turmoil of shadowy ideas, exciting and frightening. He automatically began some objections to taking this particular lane, thinking he would cover in that way the amazing whirlpool which had suddenly sprung into being within him.

But he needn't have bothered.

She knew. She had seen that momentary startled look in his eyes as he had looked down at her, a fleeting expression which must have escaped anyone save just her who had inspired it. So that, when he had dropped his pitiful pretence at normality,

and was striding along beside her in a silence utterly unlike anything which had happened between them before, she too forbore to speak and indeed, looking up now and again, and catching sight of the strong chin tilted obstinately forward as if defying some enemy, with the almost pathetically puzzled eyes, contradicting this firm attitude from above, she too felt a sudden tenderness towards the struggling Laocoon.

As for Harold, he was now past the first stage when he had tried to laugh these preposterously disturbing thoughts out of his mind. He no longer denied to himself that he wanted Alison for his own. But . . . was this love? After twenty years of comradeship to arrive like a tornado, in twenty minutes? What had they been talking about to bring on such an attack? Daylight saving, he remembered had been one of the subjects—he had been quite rude to her about that. And the limitation of the birth-rate! He cast a side-glance at Alison, but she was striding along vigorously, swishing her walking stick along the hedgerow. Thank God! he thought, she had no idea what was happening! Perhaps it wasn't quite real . . . it would pass.

His reflections came to a sudden end when the lane, which had gradually become rougher and rougher, turned in a hairpin bend and ended abruptly in a grassy riding which appeared to be the entrance to a wood.

Alison stopped swinging her stick and looked round her. "That's done it," she said softly.

"This is awful," murmured Harold. "Look here," he went on, "we must go back the way we came!"

"That's absurd," answered the girl, "we've walked about four miles down this lane alone—it'll take us half the night to get back that way?"

"Then what do you propose to do?"

"Go on through the wood, of course. "I'm certain this is the right direction!"

Harold felt an unreasonable horror of entering the wood.

"It's getting dark already," he said, feebly.

"That doesn't affect the question of the quickest way home, silly," she smiled.

"But you don't know where this wood leads?" he urged.

"No; but I *think* I do," she answered, and smiled again for some inexplicable reason of her own.

"We do at least know something about the other way," he put in, painfully aware that he was giving ground rapidly. She turned suddenly upon him.

"Harold," she said, "you've no sense of adventure: don't you know that sometimes it's miles best to try the way you don't know?"

He laughed and turned away.

"Come on, then," he cried, with a reckless note in his voice, "as you say, it must lead somewhere!"

"Of course it must," she answered softly.

But for all that, it did not lead anywhere for a very long time, and after it was quite dark and they could catch sight of a young moon playing shyly about in the tree tops, they were still in what appeared the thickest part of the wood.

Harold stopped suddenly.

"We must have come miles and miles," he said, "aren't you tired?"

She shook her head.

"But, perhaps," she said, "we might sit down and consider the position."

The roots of an aged tree offered a knobby couch of moss, and upon this they sat, persuaded into silence by the deep quiet of the woods. It was some minutes later when Harold rose suddenly.

"Alison," he said, "I want to kiss you."

"I want you to kiss me, dear," she answered, and stood up before him.

He seized her hands and pulled her towards him roughly, but he saw that she was smiling to him.

"Oh, my God!" he cried, "and we have got to go back and live in houses!"

She laughed and pushed back his head, running her fingers through his hair.

"Dear Harold!" she said. "So modern we are, and a wood and a moon bring us to this!"

"I must have loved you for ages," he said foolishly, "and never known it!"

"I knew it, Harold," she whispered, "I've been glad for ever so long!"

They walked on, silent, hand in hand. Suddenly the boy stopped.

"But I don't want to tell anybody!" he cried. "I want our love to be the most private thing in our lives! I hate the idea of a wedding and cards, and presents! Religion? I call it sacrilege!"

He broke off.

"I'm selfish," he added. "Perhaps that is only a man's point of view."

She shook her head.

"No," she answered, "I know what you mean: it's pagan—that part of it. I shall hate it too."

"But of course we must," he murmured, "we can't upset our people."

"Of course not, dear," she returned. "It would be a beastly thing to do."

Almost unconsciously she piled this new morality upon the edifice which her upbringing had defined as marriage. Something primitive, something infinitely older than two thousand years, caught up her very soul, stripped it, and presented it to the man under the silver trees. She turned to him, conscious of a fluttering, delicious fear. Something he must have read in her eyes, for he stepped back a pace as if, in a picture gallery, he had come suddenly upon a masterpiece which he had not thought to be there.

"I am yours, dear . . . yours. Now and here . . . and, God send, for ever . . . but, I want

you to know . . . now, and here . . . if you want."

Was it Alison speaking? Alison Margett, the little girl across the road, in Harold's Kindergarten days, in Kensington?

His brain seemed to beat like a drum: every sensitive fibre in his body blazed into life. Vaguely he realized that his hands were gripping her shoulders, as he heard her voice again.

"I want you to know," it insisted. "I love you. I want to give everything I've got . . . without any qualifications. Do you understand?"

Breathless, he bent his head in answer.

"After to-night, dear," said the girl, "lots of things will happen to make this less real . . . congratulations . . . presents . . . the day we'll have to go to church. That's why I want you to know—" (her voice dropped to a whisper)—"you can have all I've got to give *now* . . . before . . . before it's really yours."

Something told him of a tremendous gift, thrust before him. Something else, startling and unexpected as the double knock of a telegraph boy, was warning him not to accept it. But he himself, Harold Cutman, seemed a long way off . . . a shadowy, unimportant figure—foolishly linked up with other Cutmans. The man and the girl in the wood were quite different. The entire world had shrunk into a desert island; there were silver trees,

applauding silently, and everything was black and white, making life amazingly simple.

"Wonderful girl," he said, and realized that his voice was that of a stranger, a stranger he wanted very much to know.

All of a sudden he felt her grow stiff to his touch.

"Somebody is coming," she said, then impulsively kissed him.

"I'm glad this happened," she added quickly. "I don't want us ever to forget it, or ever to talk of it."

Then she was gone from him, sitting again on the moss where they had first rested. Every woman but this, he reflected, would have wanted to forget. But she was strong and he loved strength. His own had called to hers; it was wonderful to have had such an answer. Then, travelling like a comet through space, he came to earth. Some one was moving through the wood, not ten yards away. Alison's voice reached him in matter-of-fact tones.

"We can ask the way, now," she was saying.

"Yes," he answered, and then, suddenly, catching sight of the newcomer, "by George, it's old Willis!"

The fisherman was bringing his booty back to Whyticombe by this circuitous route: he was not quite satisfied that the keeper was altogether off the trail.

"Look here, Willis," said Harold, "we haven't the slightest idea where we are!"

The old man stopped, startled. Absorbed in his own thoughts, he was meeting with the unusual ex-

perience of being seen before he saw. His keen eyes rested upon them for a moment; Harold, tall and strong, outlined against a patch of silvered oak, Alison sitting at his feet with a little smile playing about her lips.

"Oho!" said the fisherman, all of a sudden, "the mackerel are in the bay! Brave mackerel! Flying after little glittering sprats they are; chasing their happiness right up to the shingle. Brave mackerel!"

His voice, like an actor's, took on a deeper tone.

"But they are running out the boats, my fine adventurers!" he said. "They're hurrying down to the water's edge! 'Ware nets, brave mackerel! 'Ware nets!" He broke off sharply with a sunny smile.

"Excuse me, sir," he said, "I'm old and foolish, but my eyes still serve me. I would like to be the first to congratulate you both, and wish you all the luck the round world holds—and that's a deal for lovers, miss!"

Harold, too astonished by the fisherman's powers of perception to answer, stood staring. But Alison smiled quite naturally at the old man and nodded.

"Thank you!" she said, adding with another smile: "and we'll look out for the nets!"

"But how the devil did you know?" asked Harold.

Ted Willis shook his head.

"I can't tell you, sir," he answered. "I just know. 'Tis a miracle, perhaps—for I believe in miracles, sir," he added apologetically.

Alison laughed.

"It's not necessary to believe in miracles to explain it," she said, "the fact is you're a very clever fellow, Mr. Willis!" She rose, shaking the moss off her skirts, and slipped an arm through Harold's.

The old man gave her a mock bow.

"'Tis kind of you to say so, Miss," he returned, "but if I am clever, it's because I believe in miracles. On my word, miss, I think it takes a wise man to do that."

She smiled again.

"We've made our own miracle," she said, stoutly, and Harold held her arm closer.

The fisherman bowed again.

"The road to Whyticombe lies straight on," he said, "and to the left when you leave the wood; you can't miss that road, miss."

"Can I miss the other?" she laughed. "Doesn't that lie straight on too?"

He blew a cloud of smoke from his lips.

"Indeed it does," he answered, "but it's a longer tramp than Whyticombe—and there's nothing so tiring on a long tramp than a straight road all the way."

The swish of leaves and the crack of twigs became silent as the old man went on his way.

Harold sighed.

"I suppose," he said, "that we must go home."

She nodded.

"Your mother will think we are dead," she answered, as they started along the little path.

"I say," said Harold, possessed of a sudden shyness, "do you think everybody will spot us, like old Willis?"

"No," she said, 'we aren't very obvious: and I don't think there is anyone else like Willis."

They walked on in silence for some time, then he stopped.

"Alison," he said awkwardly, "I want to say . . . about what you said before Willis came, you know . . . I want to tell you . . . I think that's wonderful. I feel somehow in the end it's going to make all the difference . . . that having happened."

"Yes," she answered, "it makes our love independent. I wanted you to know that. And now, Harold," she added briskly, "I don't want ever to talk about that again. There'll be no reason to talk about it because it will always be there. Do you understand?"

"Yes," he said, "I understand."

"What we've got to do now," she said, whipping some fallen leaves with the crook of her stick, "is to put up with being properly engaged, and listening to coughs before doors are opened, and being kind of pitied and envied at the same time, and all the general discomforts of mating."

"It sounds like a Litany," laughed Harold.

"It is a sort of Litany," she returned. "Beastly:

but I suppose all Church services are a sort of penance for daring to be happy!"

"Ah!" he said, "then you are happy?"

"So happy," she answered, "that I will put up even with orange blossom and a wedding cake!"

They had come out of the wood and had turned to the left up a steep lane.

"Shall we tell them to-night?" asked Harold, as they caught sight of the lights of Whyticombe below.

"We'll tell your mother to-night," said the girl.

"No one else?"

"No," she returned, "we will tell her to-night, and we will tell her that no one else is to know until to-morrow!"

"But why, dear?" he asked.

"Because, Harold, to know that she is the only one will give your mother the most ecstatic dreams she has had for years. Well, won't it?"

"Dear old Mums, I believe it will," he said, and then stopped.

"But, look here," he added, "what about your mother."

Alison smiled.

"My mother," she said, "is rather a wonderful person. She's almost exactly like me!"

The lane curved suddenly and the lights of cottages appeared over the hedgerows. They had reached the outskirts of Whyticombe. Harold stopped and suddenly swung her round to him.

"One more, dearest," he said, 'one more wood kiss . . . we're not going to be allowed another until we have learnt to forget the wedding!"

"Splendid man," she whispered, her lips to his.

"Splendid girl," he whispered back. His eyes and hers were closed: his fingers played about her face. That was their wooing. . . .

They were arguing about the limitation of the birth-rate once more, as they walked down the main street to the Hotel upon the front. By the light of a chemist's window Alison patted her hair into order again. They were greeted at the door with chaff and relief—and Harold, marvelling somewhat at himself, accepted the offer of a game of billiards with Loxbury before going to bed.

But Alison, on her way to her room, spent a few minutes with Emily, who was in bed, but who sat up suddenly at her news and held her hands and cried a little, saying that she was very happy. And fancy her being the first to know! And she wondered why Alison wasn't crying herself. But of course "everyone was different", and "Good-night, dear child—good-night!" And she was so thankful . . . and Harold had always been a good son . . ."

Whereupon more tears, and Alison left her to her ecstacy.

As Emily dropped off to sleep she murmured: "Dear child, dear child . . . so funny . . .

she never cried once . . . ! But the modern girl has no passion."

"What's that, dear?" asked Charles, appearing from the dressing room in his pyjamas.

But Emily was determined to hug her twelve hours' secret to herself.

"It's nothing, Charles, darling," she said, and kissed him good-night more strenuously than she had for years.

Charles noticed this and misinterpreted it. He turned out the light and found her hand in the bed.

"You rotten cad," he murmured to himself. "She's guessed something."

CHAPTER VI.

Everyone was delighted. The head waiter, a pale yellow-looking man, whose wife had long ago run away from his persistent cruelty, congratulated the young couple, with real sentiment in his watery grey eyes. When the news of the engagement reached the kitchen, the cook, whose mother, a frail old lady, had to all intents and purposes been killed by the behaviour of her son-in-law, was so moved by the romance having taken place "upon the very doorstep", that she sent up to ask what special dish she might devise for the " 'appy couple" on the first night of their engagement.

Such is the magic of love. Loxbury decided upon angels on horseback, and then, discovering that it was August, fell back upon a buck rarebit with Worcester sauce on the egg, a savoury of which he was particularly fond after drinking champagne. And he suspected that champagne would be drunk upon so wonderful a day.

In the general emotion, no one noticed that it had been the bachelor who decided upon the dish, though, as a matter of fact, upon reflection later on, this was found to be rather a pointer to the whole situation. Indeed, it very soon appeared that Romance, in the accepted bill-and-coo and "hush!

leave 'em alone" sense was completely absent in the engagement of Harold and Alison. They seemed neither excited nor embarrassed and, since there could be no ulterior motive for marriage on either side, this soon appeared to their elders a state of of affairs, not only peculiar, but almost alarming.

"And what are we going to do this morning?" asked Emily. She said it with a faint stress upon the "we," indicating that the older people could not now expect the company of the young. "We are going on the beach, as usual," said Alison firmly. "We don't want any nonsense, dear, Harold and I!"

Joan Margett suddenly made one of her quick curious gestures; as if she was pushing something away with her hands. "No nonsense," she echoed, and then quaintly, "Queer children! I wonder what they're going to live on!"

It happened that Alison's estimate of her mother was not altogether accurate. As for Emily, she wished to write letters; she took a pleasure in informing every possible relation of the engagement, almost as if, in its achievement, she had done something rather wonderful herself. The men had gone to the golf links, Harold with them. Though he was as firm as Alison in his detestation of the bill-and-coo atmosphere, he would nevertheless have preferred a morning on the beach with her. But she had said, "You need the exercise, Harold!" firmly, and with a note of possession in her voice which had

given him a curious feeling of importance. So he had gone.

Loveday and Joan sat by the water's edge, watching Alison swimming about the diving-board some fifty yards out. She swam strongly, seeming about to treat the sea with disdain, throwing up her head now and again, to fling the water from her hair.

"I begged Alison for years to wear a bathing cap," said her mother. "I know the salt makes the hair brittle, but she won't. She says it is impossible that there should be anything unhealthy in nature."

"I think," said Loveday, "that Alison has a sort of passion for strength."

The other nodded. "Yes," she returned, "Peter is like that. He cannot understand bad work. I mean in his business you know. Yet any number of people write badly, with their whole souls."

"Of course they do!" said Loveday, "One can suffer every bit as much, just because one doesn't know it's bad."

"But he can't stand it."

"Peter?"

"Yes. I've seen him angry with a manuscript, just as if it was a person." "An inefficient person." Joan took up her knitting. "Yes, and yet it isn't that he has no sympathy. If the man who wrote it was starving he'd give him anything. Only—he just doesn't understand weakness. I think Alison has that in her nature, too."

Loveday Weare broke a long silence with a little laugh. "Oh," she said, "all the keys to Life's strong boxes are hidden from us. I would have loved to have seen their wooing!"

Her companion laughed too. "What queer old-fashioned words you use, Loveday," she said. "I wonder how many people use the word 'wooing' in their lives!"

"Well," returned Loveday, "I've an old-fashioned name and, perhaps, I use odd words because I use so very few."

"Ah, then," said the other, almost to herself. "You *do* do it on purpose after all!"

"Do what, Joan?"

"Hold your tongue."

The other hesitated for a moment before answering. An expression, almost of fear, had crept into her eyes. But, apparently she fought it back, for the two aquamarines grew cold again, and her voice was quite level. "Yes. I found I had to when I was quite a girl."

"Why, dear?" Joan Margett laid down her work and looked at her friend intently. Loveday was, and had been for years, a kind of accepted mystery. Was she now to be let into the secret? "Oh, I don't know," rejoined Loveday lightly. "Perhaps I discovered that almost everything I said seemed to upset people, and I didn't know why. I can't believe it's right to upset people without knowing the reason."

Joan took her hand suddenly. "You're wonderfully level-headed and wise, Loveday," she said, "I wish you'd had a child." "I think I'd have been afraid to tell it things. I hate responsibility." She paused. "Owen wanted one . . . . I don't think he knew why . . . . but he did want one. He has been awfully kind about it." She smiled queerly, crookedly. "I think," said Joan, 'that Dr. Weare is one of the kindest and most understanding men I know."

Loveday nodded, but her hands, clasped round her knee, tightened. Her eyes grew suddenly steel-blue, and she seemed to be looking away beyond the horizon, into something even more eternal. Joan, quick to perceive, saw the change in her friend, though, so slight were the signs, that few would have noticed it. "I think," Loveday was saying, in a whisper, "I think that Owen rather enjoys being kind about it."

So there were unsounded depths, Joan thought, even in bluff Owen Weare; well, she might have known it. There are few things so deceptive as the happiness of other people. Loveday suddenly stretched out her arms like a sleeper slipping back to rest, after a bad dream. She lay down again on the pebbles and Joan realized that she was not meant to have heard that whisper.

"Here comes Alison," she said, "she's back in her depth, and is walking out. Not a bit like Venus rising from the sea!" she added, laughing.

"She doesn't mind about that," returned the other. Joan sighed. "Well," she murmured, "if you are not a great beauty, I suppose it's best not to care."

Loveday Weare watched the girl coming out of the sea, unembarrassed, triumphantly mistress of herself. "I wonder," she said, "whether it's best not to care." Alison flung herself down beside them, her dark blue bathing tights glistening in the sun. "Really Alison," said her mother, "you throw yourself down on the stones just as if you were a sack of flour!" Alison laughed. "That's alright, mother," she answered, "I don't get hurt." Loveday Weare smiled to her. "It's a wonderful thing—being engaged," she said, "it's really a moment to snatch at, and—and pigeon-hole. Like seeing mountains for the first time—or realising what St. Paul's would look like if Ludgate Hill was just a green hill far away. All those feelings ought to be pigeon-holed, don't you think?" Alison drew over her shoulders a dressing-gown of blue towelling. "Why?" she asked. "For the same reason," said the other, "as everything else is pigeon-holed; for reference." The girl smiled. "That's horribly cryptic, Mrs. Weare," she said, "But you know, I doubt whether one's elders ever give one credit for learning from their mistakes, and of course one's parents are never allowed to make any. That must be one of the hardest things about having children, don't you think?"

She moved up the beach towards her tent, and

her mother, from following her with her eyes, turned to Loveday. "Now what do you imagine she meant by that?" asked Mrs. Margett. "After all," returned the other slowly, "you and I felt the cyclone coming up, didn't we?" Joan nodded, a little breathless. "At the picnic," she murmured. "The cyclone that's been growing for years; you called it." "Well," said Loveday, "why shouldn't Alison have felt it, too?"

The idea shocked the mother; revolted her like a monstrosity. "But children," she cried, "children can't range so far!" She flung her arms out again, with a gesture full of horror. Loveday was laughing softly to herself. "Children!" she purred. "Children! It's not a word Joan that means the same as daughter or son. Some babies are never children!" The other leant across to her. "Ah," she said, "but you don't know, Loveday . . . they cling to you . . . they explore your body with their mouths . . . you are everything, their life, their food, their whole wealth; oh yes, they are all children once."

"I've not seen that," answered Loveday, "I've only known them when they are grown up. Still, I can understand that it is difficult to realize that your child knows more than you do." "But, Loveday, it's a horrible . . . a tormenting idea, that Alison should think . . . think . . ." she broke off, deeply moved. "Dear Joan," said her companion, "I suppose it is. But—" she stopped sud-

denly. "I don't believe," began the other in a low voice, "I don't believe even Peter knows."

Loveday rose suddenly. "Uh," she said suddenly, "we are operating on ourselves. We don't want to show each other our insides. We shall only lose faith. It's my fault. I'm sorry." She walked down to the water's edge, and threw in a stone, watching the ripples circling further and further away until they were lost.

Joan Margett turned suddenly, and looked away across the curve of beach to the green of the cliff, which rolled up on the other side of the little bay. She could see, just above the thick woods at its base, that little patch of darker green, the pit, which, as she gathered from Peter, "was the deuce of a place to get out of." Somewhere or other up there, was Peter himself, intent upon hitting a ball. "Oh, Peter . . . dear kind prejudiced old Peter,—(her mind slipped back through years, and told her that he *was* dear and kind . . .) Peter could know nothing of this. Indeed, was there anything to know? . . . Oh, was there?"

Turning, she saw again, the figure at the water's edge. Loveday was still throwing stones.

She remembered how, at the picnic, this strange woman had seen the coming of the cyclone; sensed it, apparently, in the sulky mood of Charles Cutman.

"The storm is coming," she had said, and Joan remembered that she had understood at once, what was meant. Yet how could she have understood,

unless . . . unless . . . ? Desperately, as a hunted beast, she looked back, and around her, seeking cover, digging out every instance she could call to mind of Peter's kindness, Peter's understanding. "It's a wonderful thing being engaged; a moment to snatch at." That was what Loveday had said. "But it isn't all gone," she almost cried the words aloud. "Oh it isn't all gone!" Most of all, beating like an insistent pain in her mind, was the idea that her child could know nothing of these possibilities. In the big world, perhaps, but in her mother's own private world it seemed indecent.

And Alison, she reflected, with a sad little smile quivering on her lips—Alison was just the girl to guess at a thing like that. She had not been a baby for very long. Suddenly she braced herself, taking a quick resolution. She walked down the beach and took Mrs. Weare by the arm. "Loveday," she said firmly, "I want to forget what we have been saying. These things are only half-true—less than half. We'd realize that soon enough, if one of them was brought back to us dead!" She waved her hand towards the links. "We're simply breeding horrible ideas by talking that kind of heresy! So I've forgotten!" Loveday nodded slowly. "Very well, Joan," she said, "That's certainly one of the ways of dealing with it. It's the same idea, I suppose, that makes it bad form to say 'Hell' in public." "It isn't that at all," answered her friend, "it is that I really and sincerely believe there's

nothing there at all. Only if you talk enough about anything . . ." her voice trailed off.

"Alright, dear," said the other. Her thin lips closed tightly; her habitual expression. But Joan Margett was much too observant a woman to miss the sign.

"No, no, Loveday," she said. "I won't have that. You have shut yourself away again! You think you've said something to upset me. I know the feeling well! But I'm not a bit upset. It's simply . . . simply that I haven't got a sad nature!" "I'm so glad," said Loveday, "I'd like to be gay, too, but I never have been. Something always seems to be pulling me back. It's queer, isn't it?" "I don't understand," said Joan. "Nor I; one has to put up with oneself!" She broke off, as the red sail of a fishing boat crept out from behind the cliff. Alison had come up behind them. "That's old Willis' boat," she said, "Harold's going fishing with him this afternoon." "Good Heavens, Alison," said Mrs. Weare, "how on earth can you tell? What good eyes you've got!" Alison laughed. "I can read her name," she said, "Yes, I think I can see pretty well." "Alison," said her mother, "you said that in a thoroughly smug and horrible way!" "Did I?" answered the girl, "I didn't mean to. But one feels so offensively fit, just after a bath." She took a rock cake out of a paper bag, and bit it. "I'm going fishing, too," she said. "Oh, well, dear," laughed her mother, "everyone to his taste! Per-

sonally I simply can't stand bait. Your father used to take me fishing here, when you were a toddler. He said everyone ought to learn to stand bait. But he gave it up in the end, and I used to watch from the beach." "Why did he give it up?" asked the girl.

Loveday looked at her quickly. What a typical question for Alison to ask? "Oh, he found I was a nuisance in the boat. I simply couldn't learn not to tuck my skirts round my feet when the fish came over the side, and one day," she chuckled at the remembrance of it—"One day Peter caught a conger, and got all mixed up in it—and the fisherman went to help him, and got a hook in his thumb, and they kept shouting to me to do things which I didn't understand, but I tried—and pulled something, and then a lot of water came into the boat, and we were all soaked! And it revived the eel a bit too, I'm afraid. Anyway, both the men forgot there was a lady in the boat, and although I was so wet and uncomfortable I did enjoy listening to them. It was really vivid . . . vivid like colour, I mean like a picture full of movement, done in reds and orange!"

She laughed again merrily. "Your father was fearfully upset about it afterwards. He seemed to think he had behaved very badly." Alison laughed too.

"Did he want to buy you something?" she asked.

"Yes, he did. I forget what it was; but some-

thing horribly extravagant." She broke off suddenly. "But how on earth did you guess that, Alison?" she said.

"I don't know. When men have behaved badly, I thought they always wanted to buy vou something."

"Oh, well," sighed Mrs. Margett, "Yes; I daresay it's their usual idea. Anyway, I was never asked to go fishing again."

Somehow, Alison's remark seemed to have taken the gaiety out of her. "I must get back," said her daughter, "I promised to meet Harold at the bottom of the lane, and walk to the hotel with him."

"We'll all go back," said Loveday, "It's too hot under this cliff at midday. It makes me feel limp all the afternoon."

By the time they arrived at the end of the asphalt Ted Willis had beached his boat, and was coming up the shingle, a string of fish in his hand. Alison ran down to meet him. "What time do we start this afternoon?" she asked.

"A quarter past two, Miss," answered the old man.

"There are plenty of fish in the bay, and it'll be a fine afternoon; thought I'd bring a wrap, Miss. It turns cold on the water a bit early." He saluted the two elder women, and disappeared up the street.

"Do you ever feel instinctively that you can lean on some people?" asked Loveday. "I feel that about old Willis!"

"Why on earth should you want to lean on poor old Willis, Mrs. Weare?" laughed Alison. Loveday laughed too. "I didn't say I wanted to," she answered, "Besides, he wouldn't let me. He has far too much dignity!"

Alison left them at the hotel, and walked along the station road, and over the bridge which spans the mouth of the river, and which is surprisingly imposing to look upon, for so small a town. Harold was just coming out of the steep, hedge-shadowed lane which led up to the club-house.

"Father and the others are having lunch up there," he said. "They are going to play this afternoon." He kissed her.

"It's awfully sweet of you to walk out all this way to me," he said.

They leaned over the bridge, and watched fat mullet nosing lazily about on the mud. "I used to fish here when I was a kid," said Harold. "Leant over this bridge for hours with a worm on a hook, getting no end of thrills. And no-one's ever caught one of these beggars here at all! But I didn't know, so the sport was just as good! They get a few of them at the mouth, I believe."

"Quaint, isn't it?" said the girl. "I remember you here, in a jersey and knickers, with a tobacco tin full of bait, always on the point of being knocked into the river. And here we are . . ." She stopped speaking as his hand caught hers. "It is quaint, dear," he said. "It makes Time so vivid

to one, eh? . . . always going on and on, I mean. I wish we could stop it for a bit!" She did not take his hand from hers, but she looked away, then quickly challenged his eyes with hers.

"Harold," she said, "I'm not very romantic, I'm afraid. I hope you don't mind?"

He shook his head. "Good Lord, Alison," he began, but she cut him short.

"I'm tremendously fond of you, Harold. I love the idea of us dealing with Life together. But . . . I'd like you to know, that I don't expect to be worshipped, or stuck on a pedestal, or anything. I think people do that almost automatically when they get engaged. I'm not even sure they don't feel that it's expected of them, though they don't realize that, of course. Only, what I mean is, that afterwards, when they are quite used to one another, that horrible old ideal and angel business has to be kept up, because neither of them can bear to tell the other that, of course, it's all rot really, and that they are just good friends. All that soppiness, I daresay, is an awfully amusing game for people who like it; like titivating your emotions, by reading costume novels. But it sets up an unreal standard, and leads, I am sure, to any number of people's misunderstandings, and smash-ups. I want ours to be a commonsense marriage, Harold. I want us to be one of the very few couples who see the thing clear, just like any other undertaking. It doesn't weaken love a bit, because you refuse to call it a

holy mystery. My idea is, it strengthens it and makes it real. I don't want us to have any bright-coloured ideal, getting more and more faded all the time, and getting surreptitiously touched up by you or me, by—well by hanging over a bridge like this and trying to raise a soppy tear by remembering that we were kids here!—I say," she broke off, "I've talked an awful lot without stopping—but I did want you to know my idea. Do you agree?" Some moments passed, as he watched a large fish nosing its way up stream.

"Yes, I agree," he answered, "That is the sensible way to look at it."

And, remembering the wood, he took comfort. This was Alison, dealing with the world at large: the wood was their very own: it would always be their very own, even if Kensington followed. She was right, of course, to show this practical face to the world. Any other road lay the inevitable and painful shattering of the absurd love ideal . . . the pedestal and the angel. Always the wood remained their very own.

"And then, you see," went on Alison, "we will have gone straight at it, with no nonsense, and if ever we should begin to feel . . . dangerous . . . as if we saw each other differently, then we'd not hide it, would we? We'd just face that too . . . and tell each other. Because there'd be nothing to weaken us!"

In very truth indeed, she had a passion for

strength! He looked at her frank questioning face, and loved her all the more for her desire to take on Life with her naked hands.

"My darling," he began, then stopped. "Of course we would tell: it's the only reasonable way." And though he was fully persuaded that this was indeed the only reasonable outlook, yet he was a little puzzled.

For this outburst of fearlessness on Alison's part, this absolute picture of strength, had made him even more tender towards her than ever, with precisely that protective feeling, which had come over him in the wood.

And this was curious, for, as all the world knows, it is only weakness that calls for tenderness and protection.

CHAPTER VII.

Alison and Harold caught a large number of mackerel that afternoon. She baited the lines and as fast as he drew one in she would have another ready for him. As an exhibition of team work it reached the highest point of efficiency. Ted Willis watched them, through the clouds of smoke which went up from a pipe almost as weather-beaten as himself, while he kept the boat following the school slowly and unerringly. But they tired at last, for mackerel fishing is not great sport, and while Harold strung the catch, Alison rewound the lines with the dexterity of an expert.

"Pretty good, Willis, eh?"

Harold regarded his fish with satisfaction.

"First class," answered the old man. "I couldn't haul 'em in quicker myself: but then my partner—he's a bit of a fool, I'm afraid, sir!"

Alison laughed.

"Partner!" she said, putting down the neatly rolled lines. "That's just the one thing I would have wished you to call me, Willis! A partner is the one who looks out for snags, isn't he, and heads away from them?"

"That's right, miss."

Harold lighted a cigarette.

"Funny," he said, "you're having known us, Willis, almost as long as we've known ourselves!"

"Years longer, Mr. Cutman," answered the old man. "Years longer. You only began to know each other yesterday, if you'll excuse my saying so."

"You mean," corrected Alison, "that we only made up our minds that we knew each other yesterday."

The fisherman smiled curiously over the water.

"Maybe," he said, "that is what I mean, miss, and maybe it's not."

He headed the boat for the shore and the sun lanced the red sail gaily with little shafts of orange. Ted Willis nodded his appreciation of the picture, to himself. He delighted in these sudden little artistries of coquetting nature.

"When is the regatta?" asked Alison.

"Middle of next week, miss," he answered. "But if you ask me the date, I can't tell you. Figures never did mean anything to me."

"I think," laughed Harold, "I shall enter for the greasy pole—I've never won a side of bacon in my life."

"You certainly won't, Harold," returned Alison. "I think I would stand anything in the world rather than the sight of you making yourself ridiculous!"

Ted Willis looked up suddenly. He had caught a ring in the girl's voice out of key with the conversation. He realized, to his astonishment, that

she had been quite serious. He knocked his pipe out over the side of the boat thoughtfully.

"Strong," he mused, yes, she was strong all right, this girl. But not strong enough to hear her man laughed at on a greasy pole. But, he reflected, perhaps that *was* rather herculean . . .

Now, Emily had walked up to the links and was having tea with Charles and Peter Margett on the little veranda outside the club-house. Loxbury and the doctor were out on the course, gravely intent upon defeating one another.

Emily was of course talking of the great subject.

"It's an occasion," she said, "for great joy and happiness, I know it is! I've been writing to the relations and friends all the morning and telling them how happy and pleased I am! But all the time, one can't help feeling how sad it all is, can one? Well, of course," she rattled on, "I don't know about men. They think so few things sad, don't they? I remember when poor Parkin lost his cousin in that railway accident in the north—was it Wales, Charles?—there was a fire, at any rate—Parkin's cousin was travelling first with a third-class ticket—while if he had been in his right class, he'd probably be alive to-day. And, do you remember, Charles, that wretched Eliza, the one, you know, who pressed your dinner jacket with a crease down the back and had to go—she kept on saying it was a judgment; I was quite irritated; the idea of death

being the wages of travelling first without the right ticket! Still, I suppose it is sin, however you look at it. But Parkin's cousin might have meant to pay the difference. I told Parkin he must always try to feel that. And you might have thought he'd have been upset. I told him he needn't wait at dinner. No. I'm wrong. It was Charles. We thought it came better from Charles. However, it turned out that he really didn't much care: he just took his Thursday evening, as usual, and then I heard he'd been to the Coliseum! That's what I mean about things being sad to men!—I mean, not being sad, you know."

"But, my dear Emily," began Charles, "there's no analogy between getting married and getting killed in a railway accident."

"No, no, dear," she answered. "Of course not; but the principle is the same."

"What principle?" asked Margett, floundering in hopeless fog.

Emily turned to him seriously.

"Well," she said slowly, "of course, I daresay that's a bad example. You see, being two, or I believe three times removed, I daresay Parkin might not feel so much about his cousin——"

"Oh," said Cutman, wearily, "not Parkin's cousin again, Emily! Whatever can the poor fellow have to do with it?"

Emily sat back, a little aggrieved.

"Well, dear," she said, "I was only trying to explain and make it quite clear how I felt."

Her husband laughed shortly.

"All I can say, then, is that your feelings must be extraordinarily intricate, eh, Margett?"

Emily smiled, good-natured as ever.

"I daresay that what I said wasn't strictly logical," she said, "but then I was never taught logic. She broke off and with a half-turn, looked away over the tops of the trees at the shimmering sea. "All the same, you do lose them!" she muttered.

So that was what Emily felt about it. Just those seven words.

"You only lose that part of them which you never had, Mrs. Cutman," said Margett.

She turned swiftly back.

"Oh, no," she answered. "You had them all, once; all!"

Charles shook his head.

"I don't think so, Emily," he said. "Almost the moment they can talk, that other part begins to grow . . . the part you never knew at all."

Margett nodded.

"Personality," he jerked. "You can't own it. . . . can't even mother it: why, you can't even know all of a dog. The world's too big an idea. You can't hold down even a tiny bit of it all for yourself."

"You ought not to want to," said Charles sturdily. "It's infernally selfish."

Emily sighed.

"Men don't have to fight so hard against it," she murmured.

"Popular fallacy," snapped Margett, always on the alert for the rights of man. "Popular fallacy, believe me, Mrs. Cutman. You don't think I like the idea of Alison's future being in another man's care, do you?"

Unexpectedly Emily gave vent to a full, happy laugh.

"Oh, oh!" she beamed at the astonished Peter, her whole face creasing up into a network of kindly lines—"Oh, you amazing men! You're always writing about the future and thinking in the past! There's nothing so old-fashioned as a decent man!"

Suddenly, with her bird-like quick turn, and with a total change of expression, she turned to Charles.

"Isn't that an epigram?" she asked, with a note of awe in her voice. "I believe it is. Anyway, it would be if Loveday had said it. But of course, I'm not clever, so it can't be. Still, really!" she beamed again on Margett. "Do you remember your Aunt Alice, Charles?" she went on, apparently as inconsequent as ever, "well, I suppose you don't. Aunts always get forgotten, somehow, like the things you put at the bottom of the shopping list,—though I don't believe people have shopping lists now—a great mistake, I think, because you could

cross the things out which weren't so important; and that saved money. That's what I mean about Aunts. They get crossed out!

"Emily," interjected Charles sternly, "what are you trying to say?"

"Oh, about Aunt Alice! Why, she said that to me?"

"Said what?" Peter Margett was trying hard to account for Emily's amazing laughter.

"She said my future was in the care of my husband."

"Well, wasn't it?" asked Charles, a little stiffly.

"Of course, dear," she answered, "but you don't imagine the present day girl looks at it like that, do you? Terribly wrong of her, I expect. Only she doesn't: I'm sure she doesn't. In a way," she added, "that makes it all the sadder."

And after this quite unexpected burst of insight into modernity, to which, truth to tell, Emily had given birth from a store of observation of which she herself was practically unaware, she relapsed into silence, back again at her original starting point—the idea of losing her son.

Both the men were taken by surprise. Margett, however, from sheer protective instinct and nothing else, remarked that "he didn't agree with her," and that "generalizations of that kind could only be proved by statistics," a remark which quite unfairly and equally naturally defeated Emily altogether and left her under the impression that she had made a

fool of herself: poor Emily was always pathetically unkind to her own convictions. She planted them in the firing line, then scuttled back to the base as fast as she could go without leaving any supports in the rear.

Now, at the first sign of the enemies' counter-offensive, without reconnoitering to discover whether it was only a bluff or an attack in force, she rose quickly and said that she must be getting home.

"Very well, Emily," said her husband. "I will take you down to the gate."

"You're not going to play again this evening?" she asked.

"There was some idea of a foursome," he answered.

"Oh, Charlie, dear," she said, "is it wise? I mean, one oughtn't to overdo it! You aren't a boy really, dear," she added, taking his arm affectionately, "though of course you will always be to me!"

The reference to his middle age irritated Cutman, as indeed, inexplicably, did the little gesture of affection.

Peter Margett came to the rescue.

"We used to be boys all the year round," he said. "Now we're boys for four weeks only. That doesn't do us any harm: on the contrary!"

Charles felt grateful that his friend had not been embarrassed—had identified himself with the scene. Peter, he thought, was a sympathetic chap . . .

capable of being a really big friend. He disappeared with Emily along the stony path which led to the gate half way down the lane.

The Editor seated himself again at the little round table, a slight frown accentuating the V-shaped mark between his eyebrows. Two members of the club, slight acquaintances, came out on their way home.

"Good evening, Margett!" said one. "You're the last left up here this evening!"

The editor looked up suddenly, jerking his mind back to the commonplace. "I'm waiting for some chaps to come in," he said. "We are going to play a few holes of foursome, if the light holds."

"Phew!" said the other, "after to-day's heat! I've played one round and I'm whacked!"

"Well, so long, Margett," came from the other man, a lean, brown individual with over-emphasized breeches, "if you're determined to kill yourself, you've chosen the right moment! No witnesses! You'll have the whole links as a private mortuary till to-morrow!"

They both laughed and disappeared down the lane.

Charles came slowly round the corner of the clubhouse. He seemed somehow to be walking like an old man. There was something grim about the downward twist of his lips, a suspicion of queerness in the brooding of his eyes. "Queerness" was the word which Peter, seeing him, suddenly visual-

ized in his brain. He jumped up quickly from his seat. Something was the matter with Charles. He was sure of it. Something had happened. Some thread, tight-drawn for a long time, had snapped. So strong was the impression of disaster upon Margett that he lost even that keen sense of diplomacy which had served him so well in his business.

"Charles," he said, sharply, "what's the matter?"

Cutman pulled himself together. Bound up in his own thoughts, he had not realized that he was back again with his friend.

"Matter?" he said, "nothing's the matter!" But even he himself realized and almost blushed at the insincerity of his tone.

"No, no; it's nothing!" he muttered wildly, and understood at once that he had made matters worse.

He saw the editor looking at him keenly, curiously. He had known old Peter so long . . . Of course, Peter could see there was something wrong. Something bigger than himself was beating down the barrier of conventional loyalty. He could no longer keep this thing private! He could not!

His hands shot suddenly out in a gesture which he knew to be theatrical and unlike himself. He realized that Peter, still with that keen questioning look in his eyes, was close beside him. He had gone too far now to turn back, he thought wildly. He must explain, something, anything . . . Oh, what should he say? He found himself listening to

his own words, as if he were a member of an audience.

"Emily," he heard. "Tears . . . tears and distress . . . Harold and Alison . . . and, oh, my God, Margett, my comforting her . . . (another meaningless, horrible wave of the arms) my comforting her . . . tongue in my cheek, damning the whole thing . . . damning her! Oh, my God," he added in horror, "My God, I've told the truth."

His head fell, buried in his hands and, as he felt the tears dampening them, his brain told him monotonously, like the maddening beat of a drum, that he had made a fool of himself—given himself away. And these were tears, tears which Peter would be bound to see. Oh God! Why had the snapping point came here? Why had he not been allowed to smash up alone?

He did not dare raise his head. His cheeks were all blotched, like a crying child. Margett must not see his cheeks. Silence. It was good of old Peter not to speak. He was giving him time; Charles understood that. He lifted his head slightly and looked through his wet fingers: there was no one there.

Then Peter had funked it . . . had gone inside. Well, no wonder . . . it had been a rotten thing to do to a fellow, to break down like that in front of him.

Suddenly he heard Peter's voice behind him.

"Look here, Charles," it said, "if you want to

talk I swear I shall understand . . ." The voice shook ever so slightly, then continued, "more than understand, perhaps." Then it regained its level. "But if you don't want to talk, Charles, I've just not been here for the last quarter of an hour at all."

Oh, splendid Peter!

Charles sat up and dared even to look round. The editor was standing some ten yards away and Charles saw, with a leap of gratitude in his soul, that he was standing with his back to him.

Oh, very splendid Peter!

"I must talk now," said Charles. "I must. If I don't talk I shall cry again. I'm . . . I'm damned sorry, Peter."

The editor swung round.

"Alright, Charles," he said. "I'm jolly glad it was I and no one else. Cements things, eh?" He settled down on the other side of the table.

"Talk," he urged. "I understand more than half already."

For some moments Charles was silent, still fighting against his longing to tell Peter everything.

When he spoke, his voice sounded weak, as if he had been ill for a long time.

"I'm not a clever man, Peter," he said, "just ordinary. If I was really clever, I suppose I could see through this mess in my soul."

He paused, but the editor said nothing. He knew that Charles must be allowed to talk, talk nonsense even if necessary, until his voice became steady again.

"We spent our honeymoon not twenty miles from here. How I loved her! Like a sort of ecstatic idiot: there was a laburnum tree we used to sit under together. It drooped all round us. We used to call it the cloak of gold and pretend it had magic in it and made us invisible from the rest of the world. You see, Peter, to be invisible from the rest of the world was our idea of Paradise. It's horrible of me to talk of these things. They ought to be sacred. They were." He paused and the knuckles of his hands showed suddenly white as the nails bit into the palms. "That was just it," he added, "that was just it! You can't . . . you can't keep it up! Have you ever felt exalted in a big cathedral? Incense and stained glass and all that? I suppose I set myself always to live with that feeling. It's a commonplace enough of marriage! But I've always been horribly conscientious, Peter. As a boy, even . . ." (his mind travelled back to his schooldays, and pictured various teasings which had come his way on the score of that same conscience. Now, in later life, there seemed a regiment of less material imps, still determined to make his life a torture).

He picked up his apologia again with an effort.

"I am sorry, Peter, old man. It's rotten for you that I should go through all this: but I must finish it now . . . I've got to."

Peter nodded.

"I did keep it up for a good long time," went on

the other. "Harold's coming seemed to restart it for a bit: she seemed to have made such an enormous sacrifice, and I felt more earthy . . . and could look up to her again—a kind of rediscovering the halo . . . Then, gradually, I found that she looked on the baby as all hers. Well, that was right enough—but somehow, it seemed to take away the halo again." His voice dropped almost to a whisper—"and then, of course, poor girl, she began to lose her looks!" He looked up quickly and added earnestly, "but that didn't count, Peter. I swear to you I don't believe that counted a bit! But, the child . . . . somehow her responsibilities towards the child seemed to smother everything. I mean all that laburnum business. She just dropped all that—quite easily. Like one drops collecting stamps when one goes to the 'Varsity—and that makes me feel it hadn't really mattered to her . . . or perhaps to me: and I began to wonder what the devil an ideal was, Peter, and whether—whether any girl would have done just as well!" He rose. "And, Oh, my God," he cried, "I'm still wondering!"

Then suddenly, in a way that reminded Peter of someone playing a piano, his voice changed from an excited treble, to its natural pitch.

"What have I been saying?" he asked. "I've behaved like a cad. I can't expect you to understand."

The Editor rose too.

"I'm a twenty-year old friend," he said simply.

"But Emily—" moaned Charles pitifully. "She could never have believed this of me, that I should have told such things to a living soul!" He seemed almost frightened at what he had done and his voice sank again to an agonized whisper.

"It's the holidays," he said, "always the holidays! If it hadn't been for the holidays, I don't believe this would have happened."

The man's lips fluttered like a child's and Margett saw that he was on the edge of breaking down again.

"Steady!" he said, firmly. "Of course it is the holidays."

The unexpected acquaintance wrenched Charles back from hysteria.

"You understand that?"

He asked the question in a tone which was almost awestricken. So it is always when one finds that one's most private thoughts are also those of one's friends.

"I understand very well, indeed," answered the Editor.

He realized with alarm that his own voice was not under control.

Of course he had recognized for years now that he had Joan . . . but he made a great effort to snap off the conviction he had so long and so persistently put aside that it appeared almost subconscious. In his turn, he looked at his friend with

an ashamed apprehension. There was a new light in Cutman's eyes, the light born of an amazing discovery.

Peter Margett spoke hastily, desperate in his desire to cover up the message of his trembling voice.

"Naturally, it is the holidays," he said, quickly. "We see more of them in the holidays."

But he knew at once that he stood condemned by that very sentence, condemned, as the rake is condemned, talking in the lounge at his club; because he knows too much. He heard Cutman's voice again, normal—no longer speaking to a father-confessor.

"You too!" he said, and stopped all of a sudden.

He wheeled round instinctively, turning his back, as Peter had done for him. The Editor's voice reached him, harsh with pain.

"Damn you, Charles," it said, and then "How in Hell has this happened?" He spoke as one asking high heaven a reason for its accidents—indignant, childlike.

Charles turned again.

"I can't help being glad, Peter," he said, "that I'm not alone in this . . . this—" he hesitated.

"Ah," rasped the other, "Sin, you were going to say!"

"Sin?" Cutman gave a hard laugh. "The wages of sin is death, Peter. We don't get off so lightly."

The Editor turned upon him quickly.

"And our wives?" he said. "Do you think they don't know, don't suffer?" Oh, curse you, Charles . . . curse you! The thing was asleep. You've wakened it! What's the good?" He was furious at his own lack of strength.

Cutman came slowly across the grass until he was facing his friend.

"Because I can't stand it, Peter," he said, "nor can you! There may be twenty years more life to us both . . . twenty years more, too, for Emily and Joan: and all those twenty years are going to be dead for us all! Dull, rotten, stagnant years, because we've lost touch with . . . with . . . oh, with the laburnum tree! I don't know how to put it better."

The Editor had pulled himself together, and only his eyes, strained and dark, now showed that he was suffering.

"Because," he said, "a tree now is only a tree . . . well, that's what must happen to everyone. A child discovers that its doll is wax . . . once it has learnt that wax exists: we discover that *our* dolls are wax—and that wax is dull! And the women: they have discovered it too, I suppose." He shrugged his shoulders. "It can't be helped," he added, hopelessly.

A long silence followed. These two men, the one overstrained, the other, by accident, had lifted the curtain on their souls. They were closer to one another than they had ever come during their long

friendship. Yet, since the unveiling had come so suddenly, they were embarrassed. At last Cutman turned.

"Peter," he said, simply, "I can't accept the verdict. I can't live the rest of my life like that." For some moments the Editor did not speak, then, at last . . .

"We've got to," he said. "There's no way out—we must just hope that they don't care!"

"Oh, God," whispered Cutman, "I can't! There must be a secret . . . something we have missed!"

"Nothing," said the Editor. "It's the usual thing: only most people don't think about it. There's no secret.

Charles crossed to the table and picked up his cap.

"Let's go down, Peter," he said. "They'll understand we didn't wait for the foursome."

"Very well," answered the other, and disappeared into the club-house. It was understood that the curtain was again drawn, but Cutman was hurling against his mind, like a racquet ball, against the back wall of a court, one sentence,

"No secret? Oh, my God, no secret to look for!"

* * * * *

And, as they walked home, out of the faint summer evening mist, already creeping along the links, behind the little lawn upon which these two had

lately stood, naked and bitterly ashamed, there stepped a woman, dressed in the short tweed skirt and knitted jumper natural to her surroundings, with merry eyes and a mouth that was seldom still, medium tall, whose years it would be hard to guess, but firm in her stride, and full of good life.

She came straight down to the chairs on which the two men had sat and there paused. She looked from one to the other, a tiny smile playing about her lips, and the smile might have been tender, or ironic, or even nothing at all, but the look in the eyes, and the eyes themselves were those of a Madonna.

She turned suddenly and vanished into the already darkening lane.

CHAPTER VIII.

The two men did not speak again, on the way back to the hotel, of the subject which flooded their minds, to the exclusion of everything else. They walked in silence, until they were in sight of the hotel entrance and then, when Margett spoke, it was to say something utterly trivial.

"We couldn't have played many holes, anyway. The light is too bad." And Cutman nodded seriously.

He found Emily in the drawing-room, arranging some wild flowers in a green and yellow vase which she had borrowed from the establishment. Apparently, she had recovered from her recent distress and was now concentrating upon the joyous side of the marriage.

"What do you think?" she said as Charles came in, "so touching and kind: it almost made me cry, Charles! And so unexpected! I mean, you don't expect people to care enough, do you? Well, not those sort: somehow the people whose bills you have to pay never seem as human as others. Anyway, it was a great surprise to me, and I think it would have been to you, Charles!"

Cutman waited for her to go on, but nothing happened.

"Perhaps it would," he said, "if I knew what it was!"

"Why," continued Emily, "when I got back, Mrs. Honeycott met me and started to say a lot of nice things about Harold, about when he was here as a little boy; do you know, Charles, it's amazing what these people remember, when you don't imagine they remember anything! She recalled all about when Harold cut his thumb and there was the lock-jaw panic because he couldn't speak and then we found it was one of those lime-drops he used to buy at Drayton's, jammed right in between his back teeth!"

"But what has happened?" asked her husband.

"Oh, yes," answered Emily, tying her mind down to the matter in hand with a great effort. "Apparently it all started in the kitchen: the cook, you know, kind soul, wanted to send up a special dish at dinner to-night. Well, of course, she had to ask Mrs. Honeycott's permission, and when Mrs. Honeycott heard, she evidently went one better, and now there's to be a special dinner in a private room to celebrate their engagement and I must say, Charles, that I think the whole thing is very touching and you are not to laugh at the cook or Mrs. Honeycott!"

Charles smiled and shook his head.

"Why should I?" he said.

But . . . oh, ye Gods! a dinner to celebrate the coming of another marriage, on this night, of all nights!

"You'll have to make a speech, Charles," he heard her saying, "and so will Peter Margett, and I'm sure no one will be able to prevent Mr. Loxbury making one too!"

"Oh, surely," he said, "we can do without speeches."

"It will look very odd," answered Emily seriously, "if someone doesn't say a few words."

Emily had always been a martyr to the terror of things seeming "very odd." This disease, as a matter of fact, had governed most of her life. Charles realized that she would be upset if the "few words" were not forthcoming. It was an occasion which could only happen once and that it should not have happened with full ritual, would, he knew, always remain a source of real distress to Emily.

So he and Peter Margett would say a few words, to congratulate the happy couple . . . Well, that was simple and natural enough. But, to-night! His brows gathered over the irony of this dinner, which had to be so very happy.

Emily, of course, misunderstood his long silence.

"Really, Charlie," she said, "you've made speeches at any number of big dinners. It isn't so very terrifying to congratulate your son and your future daughter-in-law, is it?"

He laughed uneasily.

"No, no," he said. "But it's rather short notice:

I must think of something witty. It's pretty hard, you know, being up against a journalist!"

She plumped the last fox-glove into position in the green vase and crossed to him.

"You're just as funny as any journalist, Charlie," she said, kissing him on the cheek. "I love all your jokes!"

He kissed her, looking over her head with trouble in his eyes.

"Then that's all right," he answered lightly. "And what do the children think of it?"

"They don't know about it. It's being kept as a great surprise for them!" She laughed happily, snatching back, as some women will at these times, a bit of the romance herself.

"It's time we started to dress, dear!" she added, and pushed him playfully through the door, carrying the flowers for the dinner table in her hand.

Alison met Harold as he came down to the lounge from his bedroom.

"Well," she asked, with a little laugh, "I've just heard about the dinner, from mother. What do you think about that?"

"It's fearfully kind of them," said Harold. He was half afraid that Alison would have put her practical foot down on the whole business.

But she answered at once with a nod.

"It is," she said, "awfully kind. I think it was specially jolly of the cook. Why on earth should she care?"

"Wonderfully kind," murmured Harold again.

"But they are fixing it, like this," went on Alison, "making it into a date, an anniversary. Then there's the wedding: of course that gets fixed into a date automatically—it just becomes a date instead of a day. The date sort of overwhelms the day. Have you ever noticed that any number of people simply adore dates?"

Her tone was light, but Harold noticed an undernote of something like irritation.

"Well, you see . . ." he was beginning slowly, but she went straight on.

"Ted Willis is a keen old bird," she said, with something very like a chuckle. " 'The mackerel are in the bay,' he said, "but they're hurrying down the boats. 'Ware nets!'—I think we're going to slip round the nets all right, Harold!" she added triumphantly, as she took his arm.

Owen Weare was coming down the stairs, his full mouth curved with a smile of conscious and beaming kindliness. It was impossible, looking at him, to imagine that he would not make a speech.

"You see what I meant," whispered Alison, "about all the things that would happen to make it less real?"

Harold nodded.

Then Emily, fussing happily down the stairs, and Joan cautiously forming a chorus to the congratulations of the others.

Loveday Weare came down alone, pausing at the bend in the stairs, to look down upon the group in the lounge.

She saw the doctor beaming radiant romance upon the young couple, taking the lead in welcoming these two recruits to the ranks of the blessed, and her lips curled in an ironical smile. There was none of that bedside manner at her bed. Then she too joined them, silent as ever. Loxbury arrived with twinkling eyes, absolutely in his element, and persisting in calling himself a "blackleg," to the complete mystification of Emily, who imagined he was saying "blackhead" and did not consider it in the best of taste. The dinner proved successful enough, the general appreciation of the good-nature that had inspired it, having its influence even among all these cross-currents seated round the table.

There was a friendly argument as to who should propose the health of the bride. Loxbury, determined to speak at all costs, wished to perform this duty, on the score that he was unbiased.

Emily, fervid for the correct thing, insisted that, however informal the "little gathering" as she called it, might be, Charles Cutman possessed an inalienable right to propose the health of his future daughter-in-law. Peter Margett cut short the conversation, suddenly.

"Of course, it's for Charles," he said. "I shall reply. Loxbury can speak on 'The right to be a bachelor' afterwards."

There was a general laugh as Cutman rose, a glass of Port in his hand. Peter, he thought, was coming through all right, why not he? If only this dinner had been to-morrow or the next day. Why, it was barely two hours ago, that rending . . . Now his brain was divided. He must attempt nothing but a few simple words. He was obsessed with the idea that he must show how sincere he was.

"Ladies and Gentlemen," he began, "or should I say old friends?—this is a very happy duty which devolves upon me unexpectedly, to-night."

(Hear! hear!" from the doctor, the very picture of Dickensian goodwill.)

"You must forgive me, if, owing to its unexpectedness, my words are ill-chosen and unready."

"'No—no!" from Harold, backing up his father from pure family feeling.)

"All of us here, with one exception, (Loxbury pretended to be overcome with embarrassment and shame) have known what it means to have been happily mated, for more years than we care to acknowledge. I cannot do better, in proposing the health of Alison, than to express the hope that she will enjoy long life, splendid health and a happiness equal to that of those who are wishing her well to-night!" He sat down, his eyes on his plate, feeling that if he found that Peter Margett was looking at him, he might scream. But they were all applauding, and Emily was shouting "bravo" in a thin, piercing treble.

Then the Editor was on his feet.

"As a dress-rehearsal for the wedding-breakfast," he said, "I welcome this opportunity of trying it upon the dog, as I believe the theatrical expression goes! (laughter.) I want to thank dear old Charles very much indeed, on behalf of myself, my wife and my daughter, for all the good things he has wished her in the future. I think he might have said a little more—" (Hear! hear!" again from the doctor.) "But it is my experience that he reserves most of his vocabulary for use on the golf links." (Loud and prolonged laughter.)

"Oh, splendid Peter!" thought Charles. He was trotting out all the traditional jokes, calmly and methodically, putting the tension that he knew was there, back to the normal, with a sure touch.

"Of course," continued the Editor, "our young friend, Harold, does not want any bouquets from me. At work and at play, however, I think we have known him long enough to say that we thoroughly approve of his methods!"

(Loud applause, during which Emily thumps Harold violently upon the back, while two great glistening tears roll slowly down her cheeks.)

"As for his work," went on Peter, "I may say I have some knowledge of that, having, on several occasions, had the pleasure of refusing articles from his pen." (Laughter.) "For my daughter," he continued, "I really don't know what I can say. From the age of four until ten, she and I were

in frequent disagreement upon most questions." (Loud laughter. Really Peter was superb!) "But after that, I think we have seen eye to eye in most matters and I cannot do better than to associate Joan with myself in an expression, which politicians invariably employ when they propose to hedge the next day—namely that Alison is our daughter, a word I use with all the emphasis of which I am capable," (laughter) "and that the Government, that is, myself and Joan, will accept full responsibility for her actions in the future!"

He sat down amid applause and laughter. Charles, glancing across at his face as he smilingly filled up Loveday's glass could hardly realize that this was the man who not three hours since had cried in a voice thin with pain, "Curse you, Charles! The thing was asleep, you've wakened it!" He realized that his own little speech had been stilted, formal. He wondered whether anyone had noticed it, and felt a pang of irritation at Peter's success. Yet there was no doubt that the pain in his voice, up there on the links, had been real.

Well, the future would be easier for Peter, anyway, with that wonderful faculty for hiding himself, that strange working efficiency when the engine was rotten, inside. And he, Charles (a physical fear gripped him at the thought), had got to hide himself for the rest of his life. . . .

There was no secret! Peter had said. But Charles kept a smile on his lips, while these thoughts chased one another through his mind, for the table

was in an uproar of merriment. Loxbury was trying to make a speech, deploring with mock tragedy the lonely life of a bachelor, and the doctor was interrupting him with jovial sarcasms.

The door opened suddenly, and the voice at the table died away, in jerks, like the smashing of a large piece of china.

A woman stood in the doorway, looking at the scene. She was in evening dress, rather wonderful evening dress, it seemed in the frame of the common little room, for its colours, though not particularly bright in themselves, seemed somehow to take all the light to them, as if an invisible ray had been thrown upon her at her entrance. Her eyes twinkled merrily on the company at the table, and the corners of her lips twitched with the beginnings of a smile. If Harold had been asked, he would have said she was a girl. Charles would have called her a woman. That was her age. Her fascination—for it was indubitable—was not easy to define. Her deep soft eyes were tired, but they looked as if they were just tired from laughing. She gave, somehow or other, an enormous impression of vitality . . . a vitality eternal, independent of herself. An arresting, electric personality—the Lady of the Links. Then she laughed, and Charles had a queer sudden impression that he had not expected her to be so human.

Her laugh, in fact, freed them all from the spell of her unexpected entrance.

"I'm so sorry!" she said, in a gentle, caressing

voice, "You see, I engaged this sitting room, but I only did it to-night. And I expect we've overlapped!"

She laughed again and the commonplace explanation of her presence came, curiously enough, as a relief.

Doctor Weare was the first to speak.

"What a silly muddle!" he said, "but we need not inconvenience you. We have just finished!"

The newcomer made a movement of protest but the Doctor waved it aside breezily.

"Certainly not," he said. "We couldn't possibly keep you out of your room. Charles, I think the bell is behind you; this litter must be cleared away." The little party passed out, murmuring excuses. In the lounge Loveday turned to Joan.

"I've seen that face before somewhere," she said.

"I wonder where?" queried the other.

Loveday shook her head.

"In a picture perhaps," she murmured, "or perhaps in a dream: I've only seen it for a moment."

The hearty voice of her husband cut her short.

"And I say," he was asserting, "that a walk under the moon is the proper programme! Just as far as the huts and back. Shake down the dinner and do us all good!"

They acquiesced. None, not even had they wanted to, would have attempted to argue with the doctor in his bluffest mood. The sound of their footsteps merged into the gentle rustle of the sea.

Upstairs, the intruder had closed the door; then she had walked slowly round to the chair at the head of the table where Charles had been. She rested her hands on the back of the chair and her eyes travelled across to Peter's empty seat.

The same tender little smile played about her lips as might have been seen, a few hours ago, up on the cliffs.

At last she curled herself up on a queer stiff little sofa which stood in the window, and looked out on the moon, and the little crawling things under the moon.

Accident is grim in its sense of fitness and contrived that Charles and Peter Margett should find themselves together in the walk along the front. A natural shyness possessed them both, and for some time they strode along in silence.

"You were wonderful at dinner," said Charles at last.

The Editor cursed under his breath.

"Don't follow it up," he said. "Don't hunt it, Charles, for Heaven's sake. Can't you leave it alone? It will slip back to its proper place, if you give it a chance."

"That's what Willis meant by cowardice." The barrister hardly realized that he had said this aloud, until Peter turned upon him savagely.

"Leave it alone, you fool!" he said, in a voice tense with anger.

So that was the secret of Peter's strength, the power of putting things behind him.

"Look here, Peter," said the other, "that's surrender, you know!"

He felt that the sentence sounded like a schoolboy's. But Peter Margett seemed to take it seriously enough.

"I tell you," he said, "that is what it means to be strong . . . to know when to surrender. Fate, God, Life . . . whatever you like to call him, you've got to show him the white flag. That's the price of sanity."

"No, no, Peter, it's a fearful creed."

The other man dug his stick into the grass and fern at the cliff's side.

"All creeds are fearful," he muttered. "That's what they are for: always to make you afraid of something or other."

But Charles shook his head vigorously. Yet he felt he could not argue about it. This was Peter's way of life, which had practically come to be himself.

"Anyway," he said, at last, "there is one thing I want you to know, Peter. I never meant that I no longer love Emily."

"Of course not," came the answer, "only we object to living the rest of our lives in half-tones. Heavens above! it's natural enough. Read a story full of colour, a story of ships . . . it makes us restless. Well, why? You and I know why. But

it's no good, Charles. You've had your bit of colour, and you can't recapture it. I tell you there's no power on earth that can make a laburnum tree a cloak of gold for us, now. If you can't be gloriously happy, be as happy as you can. That's the answer!"

Charles could see that Peter wanted to escape from the subject. He was not, by nature, an adventurer and he always clung, desperately, to the status quo. It was a new light on Peter, who by virtue of talking in jerks and headlines, had achieved a reputation for distinguished originality.

Still, Charles was ready enough to abandon the subject; he had told Peter what he had wanted to tell him, that he still loved Emily. Why he should have wanted to tell him that, he could not imagine. Half-tones indeed! Why, this last weakness reduced the picture of his existence to a smudge of hazy greys. Peter's voice recalled him to the immediate present.

"Curious woman," he was saying. "Interesting: not a bit like Whyticombe!"

Strangely enough, Charles understood immediately what woman he meant.

"Not quite like any place," he answered. "Yes, I think 'interesting' is the only word for her."

He was a little surprised to find himself giving the adjective so much thought. . . .

By this time they had lost sight of the others, and, having no enthusiasm for the silver pageant of that summer night-sky, turned back towards the

hotel. As they walked in silence, someone started singing down by the waters' edge. The voice, a small mellow baritone, quavered every now and then, in a quaint arresting way. Some of the words reached them.

"For all my feet can't get 'em wings,
Nor eyes o' mine pierce far,
I'll thank old Earth for what she brings—
With my fingers round a star!"

The singer, plainly enough, was fitting his words to his tune. Neither was particularly erudite, but the general effect was intriguing. The Editor, always at the mercy of word magic, stopped suddenly.

"For all the sea be cruel and wet,
With devil a harbour bar,
I reckon I'll make my landfall yet,
With my fingers round a star."

The words ceased abruptly, but the melody, if such a singsong could be called melody, was carried on in a soft, gay humming. Someone, thought Charles, was very happy, down by the water's edge.

What was it about that voice that he found so oddly familiar? Most familiar of all when it cracked and quavered and seemed to go stammering away on the slight night breeze.

Not old Willis, surely, singing, on the edge of the stones, at this time of night?

"Curious; odd tune, queer words!"

The Editor's voice broke in upon Cutman's meditations.

"Metre all wrong, of course. But the whole thing . . . time and all . . . something of the fascination of the primitive! Don't talk," he added sharply, "he may go on!"

But the singer had finished, and, though the two men stood on the edge of the asphalt, straining every nerve for another note, nothing came to them except the eternal splash and draw of the sea upon the patient pebbles.

Charles, remembering that the old fisherman had favoured him with some part of his private self under the hedge near Testleigh woods, felt it no business of his to tell Peter any suspicions as to the identity of this singer of crude rhymes at the sea's edge.

"Curious," said the Editor, as they continued on their way. "Some old sea chanty, perhaps: and yet it didn't sound like that."

It appeared that Peter possessed a vast and far-reaching knowledge on the subject of sea-chanties. Doubtless all the essential information on such matters was pigeon-holed at his office, in case wind-jammers became, all of a sudden, a popular subject. At any rate, he insisted, for the remainder of the walk, on pumping into the unwillingly receptive Charles all manner of facts about sailors: every one of them absolutely true and absolutely without romance.

Further along the front, sitting upon a seat under the cliff, Emily was seriously disturbed.

"You see," she was saying to Joan and Loveday, "It's so queer: I mean, one can't help remembering how different it was when we were engaged! Of course, I know that young people are very different now: I myself had a daily housemaid with most astonishing ideas—she was in love with a postman, a very nice man, I believe—I think most postmen are, don't you?"

Loveday nodded. She knew that Emily would let her meaning escape, as it were by accident, if her listeners were patient enough.

"But, do you know that girl was just as much interested in the postal system as in the postman? Well, that's what I mean about Harold and Alison. They—they won't be left alone, you know. There doesn't seem any sort of—of nice silliness about them!"

Joan Margett nodded. As the mother of Harold's future wife she felt, in a sense, that she must share this puzzle with Emily.

"Alison," she said, "has always been tremendously independent."

Emily turned to her earnestly.

"I don't want you to think," she answered, "that I am criticising her: Alison is a dear girl. . . . You know I think that, Joan, dear?"

Her hand, clammily sincere, found Joan's. Its touch was unreasonably, unjustifiably irritating.

Joan realized that Emily was always irritating . . . because she was always so sincere and so "right."

"Yes, of course," she said, trying hard to tune her voice to the other's pitch of sentiment, "only, they are both of the new generation, you know—I suppose they must work out their own salvation."

She knew that she had made use of a cliché and that, as always, it had struck a dull, lifeless chord.

Loveday, rising suddenly, came to her rescue. She stretched her arms, wearily almost, and spoke away to the water, as if to an audience that was not there.

"Yes, it's not good to fight it," she said. "It's not a worthy fight. Because, don't you see, that's how they feel, and so that's how they must be. After all, who knows? They may be right: but, of course, at our age we are content, and rightly content, to be wrong!"

She turned suddenly to Emily.

"Don't you understand," she went on, "that we shall be dead long before they know the result of their experiment? Wouldn't you far rather they took a new road, if it looks good to them, than plodded slowly along the one we know, just because we line the pavement and keep them to it?"

But Emily, full of misgiving, shook her head.

"No, Loveday dear," she said. "Of course, I'm sure that what you say is right . . . I mean really right. Like a circle being an infinite number

of dots, or something, as Charlie says . . . and I'm sure he's right. Only, to me, it just makes circles impossible. I suppose I've my own foolish idea of a circle—a thing like my embroidery frame. I'm sure if I thought it was made of dots going on forever, I couldn't do another stitch."

She broke off suddenly with a gesture of impatience.

"There I go!" she said petulantly. "I'm not thinking about circles at all, you know!"

Joan nodded, reassuringly.

"I know," she answered. "You mean that a scientific engagement is a bad start for marriage."

Emily nodded quickly.

"Yes," she said, "that's it; I can't really believe in it."

"I daresay." The impersonal voice of Loveday broke in unexpectedly. "But can you really believe in——"

She hesitated and stopped. Joan, with her keen sensibilities, scented danger, danger to the desirable illusions of Emily.

"She is quite right," she said, "it isn't natural. And, if it isn't natural, it's a pity!"

She uttered the last sentence defiantly, as one who is not really prepared to defend her argument. But Loveday understood and was silent.

After all, Emily had a right to be happy, any way she could.

And then Emily shivered a little and said it was getting chilly and that she was going to find Charlie.

They watched her thick, comfortable figure disappearing into the dark. It was Joan who was the first to speak.

"You shouldn't do it, Loveday," she murmured. "What's the use of upsetting poor Emily? It isn't as if she could discover anything, through being upset. She's not made like that."

Loveday Weare laughed, a queer, hopeless laugh.

"I think," she said, "that Emily is going to be horribly upset before very long."

"Ah?" Joan's voice was full of interest. "The storm?"

Loveday nodded.

"I rather think it's broken already," she said.

Joan answered her very seriously.

"Look here," she said, "you ought not to say these things, unless you know . . . and not even then, perhaps!"

The other nodded in acquiescence.

"Then I won't say them, Joan: I know that there are advantages in living in blinkers."

But her friend was fascinated, fascinated by the queer, almost supernatural certainty of this woman. She could not, as she felt she should, cut loose from the subject.

"And . . . Peter?" she whispered.

Loveday nodded, without a word. But at that the very soul of Joan revolted. Peter's character, Peter's idiosyncrasies, even Peter's absurdities, she might discuss and laugh at. After all,, Peter would no longer wish to be treated as a god. Those years

were past. But this—this hinted at deeper, more private weaknesses; which, even if they existed, were hers, no one else's. She turned on Loveday, like a tigress, yes, a tigress defending her young.

For Peter had always been more her young than Alison.

"You suggest these things lightly enough, of other men!" she said angrily. "I believe, Loveday, that you enjoy giving words that may mean nothing or everything, and playing with words and hinting! But if you know so much, or guess so much, what of your own man? What of Owen in this precious storm?"

She stopped indignant, wanting words to feed her wrath. But Loveday's answer, unexpected, painting, as it did, in a few vivid words, the picture of a whole lifetime of possible ideals stifled at the source, found her at last, sitting abject, abject with pity, and a sense of her own past blessings.

"Owen?" she had echoed, derisively, driven suddenly out of her long-schooled reticence. "Owen? Dear, bluff, honest old Owen, the very prince of good fellows!"

Every word burnt like acid. She dropped her voice to a lower, tenser key.

"Owen will never have to fight with any storm," she said. "Why do you think, Joan, that I'm so silent, so—so queer? Oh, I know well enough what others think of me! Do you suppose it's natural? Do you think I was born without a tongue and—oh, lot's of things I wanted to say?"

Her white hands fluttered pathetically against the rail of the seat.

"Of course," she went on, "I've tried to cover it up. I told you, not long ago, that it was because I found that the things I said upset people! And you believed it! Why, Joan, it doesn't matter upsetting people, in that way! Do you think I've no more courage than that?"

She leant across the seat, her face very near her friend's.

"Couldn't you guess?" she said. "Couldn't you guess that it was because I had never been happy?"

Joan remembered suddenly the curious words she had used of the doctor: "I believe he likes being kind."

The other gave a queer, discordant laugh.

"Oh," she whispered, "there are vices which people never speak about . . . perhaps because they are too common; I don't know. Have you ever heard of the Marquis de Sade? He loved, adored blood and pain."

Her voice sank lower still.

"There's a sadism of the mind, Joan,—a fearful lust and longing to see the victim shrink and curl up, like the fringe of an oyster when you sprinkle the vinegar upon it!"

"Dear bluff, sympathetic Owen! How his patients love him. But I am his real patient, Joan,—the subject for his vivisection!"

She threw her hands into the air and a dry sob escaped from her throat.

"In the bedroom . . . after dinner . . . but especially in the bedroom . . . he operates on me: he knows I am too sensitive to find the anaesthetic that use—even bad use—can bring to some people. He torments my beliefs, he even remembers the few words I have said during the day and twists them into ridicule! And I hear so much, from the people who pay him, of Owen's wonderful bedside manner! Dear, splendid old Owen, I've heard people say, what a pity he isn't a father! Joan, though almost every day the probe is twisted deep into that particular sore, I swear to you that I've thanked God again and again that Owen will never be a father now! Because I love children."

She stopped suddenly, breathing fast. Joan was crushed, appalled by this revelation from the cellared soul of Loveday Weare. She was incapable of speech, even if adequate words could have come to her.

"I can trust you," said Loveday at last, "to say nothing of what I've told you. It's not loyalty. I owe none to him. But I hate pity."

She rose deliberately.

"As for my husband," she said, "he will never go through any crisis in his affections for me. I wish to God he would, and lose the battle!"

Joan saw her thin lips close tightly, and she realized that Loveday had said everything. She rose, her mind numbed by this amazing thing. She

felt she could not speak, could not attempt to deal with such a tragedy in foolish words. But Loveday, with her fund of strange unexpected sympathies, understood her friend's embarrassment.

"I don't want pity, dear," she said. "I don't want you to talk of it, at all. It's my own fault, in a way, for I have never been strong enough to cut myself off from the way I was brought up, and to leave him. I would never have told you—only I wanted you to know how much you've got to be thankful for, even if Peter deserted you to-morrow!"

Joan squeezed her hand in the darkness; it was pitiful to feel how Loveday responded to this like a schoolgirl . . . oh, pitiful!

She could not speak even then, and they reached the hotel, still silent.

In the hall was the doctor, lately arrived with Alison and Harold. He came forward, beaming, and took his wife's arm.

"I have been the favoured one!" he said in his rich, round voice, "I have walked home with the two guests of the evening! Good-night, everybody!" he added, collecting them all with one big paternal sweep of his eyes. "It's time to turn in, if we are going to keep up the celebrations by a real holiday morning to-morrow!"

His very intonation was an incitement to jollity. He turned and went up the stairs, his arm still holding Loveday's. Beneath the crook of his elbow

her hand hung listless, as dumb in its appearance as her own nature had become.

They disappeared round the bend on to the landing.

Joan stared after them, another horror dawning in her eyes. For the meaning of Loveday's words had, all at once, become real to her.

CHAPTER IX.

It was Loxbury who made the amazing discovery on the golf links. He had been slicing his tee shots, and, becoming suddenly serious about it, had gone up early, before the morning round, and spent an hour with the professional. When the others arrived, the bachelor was beaming with suppressed information.

"A handicap of four," he announced, "and Hartley here, says she plays down to a man's eight!"

Hartley, the professional, nodded. He was a short, bullet-headed little man, with hands which were perpetually writhing together, as if looking for new variations of the grip. "Yes, sir," he said, "I was out a few holes with her this morning: that's about her form. Quite deadly on the green, sir, but of course, no great length, and apt to make mistakes with her irons."

This, in golfing terms, is almost expressive of a man's ideal in woman. Let her be deadly on the greens: there's no great harm in that, even though it should win the match in the end. But, to be outdriven from the tee! That would be intolerable and place her immediately so much higher than the angels that, in sheer self-defence, she would have to be artificially degraded, and called "unfeminine" or

"over-developed," or indeed anything that would serve, however inconclusively, to satisfy the male sense of pride.

And then that aptitude for making mistakes with her irons! There was something tremendously sympathetic about that. This, without a doubt is the really adorable woman, the girl who, any moment, may make a mistake with her iron . . . or indeed, with anything else. Queer creatures, these knickerbockered, crude-looking objects, called men. They have a sneaking adoration for incompetence in their women-kind, mixed with a childish and worshipping amazement that she is able to do anything at all. It is possible that women, too, are glad when their men fail in something. Both have a queer passion for weakness, hidden away, like a secret vice, under the obvious rectitude of admiration for strength.

"She's out now," Hartley was saying, "playing the pit hole. It's a long carry for a woman, sir, and she's awfully keen about doing it."

There was something fascinating about that, too: not so fascinating, of course, as if she should carry the pit, but just the wanting to. One felt one would encourage her like anything, and really hope that the ball would fly, at last, over the brink.

And yet, if it did, one knew that it would be a disappointment.

Hartley vanished into the wooden hut, that was his factory.

"I should never have thought," said Loxbury, "from seeing her in evening dress, that she was a golfer!"

"Seems to be a master—mistress, rather, at both games!" laughed Peter.

"She could play any of us level on her handicap!"

Charles' comment struck the others as funny.

"Poor old Charles!" said Loxbury. "Is that a revelation to you? Why, there are plenty of women who could give us all strokes."

"Yes, of course," answered Charles, only, he had never imagined them to be quite that kind of woman, not in evening dress, anyway. Besides, a woman who could play you level on your handicap . . . that was just about everything.

A scratch player was always just a little inhuman to Charles.

Then, suddenly, Peter realized that they had all been talking of "her," and that no one knew in the least who "she" was. Yet undoubtedly, all had been talking of the same person. It must be, he thought, a very strong personality to impress itself thus without any label whatsoever.

"What is her name?" he asked, turning to Loxbury.

The bachelor shook his head.

"Upon my word," he answered, "I don't know!"

He called through the open door of the workshop, "Hartley, what is the lady's name?"

The professional appeared in the doorway, the shaft of a club in his hand.

"She never gave me her name, sir," he said, "She's not been here before, in my time: but I suppose she'll have put her name in the green-fee book."

They went in to change their shoes, and Cutman, who had walked up in the golfing boots which he always took home and oiled religiously, turned over the pages of the strangers' book, while waiting for the others.

The ink on the last entry, a bold, loveable scrawl, was still wet.

But the name written was simply "Mary." There was, it is true, a kind of hieroglyphic in front of it, which might have been an initial. Yet, Mary, as a surname, was really rather amazing. Under the space reserved for the home-club of visitors, there was simply a dash. But the smaller space on the other side of the page showed that, at any rate, Miss Mary—or was it Mrs. Mary?—had paid her three-and-sixpence.

"I say," said Charles, as Peter came into the room, "Just look at this!"

The Editor crossed and peered over his shoulder.

"So that's the lady of last night," he said. "Mary! What a surname! It would make introductions extremely embarrassing, eh?" He laughed, and looked at the scrawl again.

"Of course," he said, "as a woman's surname, it's quite pretty. Miss Felicia Mary—or Mrs. F. J. Mary." As usual he was twisting the words into colours. "But the thing is, she must have had a father . . . or a husband; and then it's an

absurdity. Fred Mary, Esq., or George Mary, Solicitor!"

He laughed heartily at his own conceptions: "And think," he chuckled, "if he'd been fat . . . or with a walrus moustache or something! Ye gods, think of a conversation at his Club! 'Excuse me, I didn't quite catch your name!'—'My name's Mary, sir.' And my dear Charles, he might be bald as well!" Peter went off into shrieks of laughter at the conceit. He appeared to have put far behind him that fearful stripping of himself, which, in point of mere time, was so very close.

Even Charles, whose wound, if not deeper, at least throbbed more painfully, seemed now to have slipped back into the normal without any obvious period of convalescence.

Not that there was anything peculiar in this sliding back into their everyday selves. The biggest, most poignant tragedy in the world escapes its own tyranny in the end; finding its proper value in the scheme of things, colouring the picture of a life, but never directing its design. And besides, the pains of Peter and of Charles, whatever their private ideas on the subject, were not built on this heroic scale. Their trouble, acute only because they were unfortunate enough to be acutely conscious of it, was far too common and too ordinary to be admitted to the company of the great. And yet, in all conscience, they suffered enough, thereby! Which makes it all the more odd that here they were,

joking and laughing over a name in the visitors' book!

But deep down in Charles, and in Peter Margett, too, something was stirring, stirring ever so gently and cautiously, like a rabbit in a wood, a quarter of a mile ahead of the beaters; stirring uneasily, and, so softly now that they themselves were hardly aware of it. Yet, at any moment, like the rabbit, this something might take fright, plunging wildly away, crashing through the bracken, heedless of tell-tale rustlings and cracklings till, inevitably at last, there came, too late to stop, the great green closet of a riding, where a gun would very surely have been placed.

Then, of course, you must not hesitate because, if you do, you will find that your mad speed has petered out just exactly in the middle of that pitiless stretch of uncovered grass, and, choked with a paralytic sense of immediate disaster, you will sit up, bunched and solid, a gift to the most hopeless duffer amongst the guns.

That, if one could only know it, must be rabbit-philosophy.

But, unlike the rabbit, Charles and Peter were unaware not only of the far-off presence of the beater, but even that they were stirring at all.

Yet there was the fact. The beater was trying hard to get a small white ball over the far side of a green pit, and Charles Cutman and Peter Margett

were—still in rabbit-language—unconsciously cocking their ears to the alarm.

They played their customary morning round, two singles. Charles was playing against the doctor, and (for he could not completely ignore the still smouldering fire of his distress), envied Owen Weare his whole-hearted enthusiasm for the game. Here was a man, he thought, whose love had triumphed over all these problems. He felt a new admiration for the doctor, abasing himself as a miserable creature. And, naturally enough, he thereby pressed and topped and fluffed his approaches, and over-ran or was never up to the hole, and indeed broke all the ten commandments of golf.

As a result he was well beaten, and, worst of all, discovered that he did not care.

At lunch, on the balcony, which offered a lovely view of the sea over the tree tops, it was discovered that Loxbury, still slicing, was disinclined for the usual afternoon foursome. As a matter of fact he was sulking about these very tee-shots, exactly as a child sulks when its tower of bricks, through some initial mistake, falls at the actual moment of perfection. Such a demonstration in the nursery is accounted naughty, and solemn words are spoken of the virtues of self-control as exemplified in the behaviour of Bruce and the spider or some other entirely irritating character, happily for himself always out of reach of the maddened child.

But in golf it is quite different. Petulance is respected. Rage is understood, and even dignified by the tribute of sympathetic silence.

Loxbury, who, had he been forty years younger would inevitably have been sent to bed for his behaviour at lunch, was accounted a man suffering; unfairly visited by disaster, and was treated with a kind and tactful sympathy. Thus, wrapt about with that peculiar hauteur of self pity which only a failure at golf can produce, he was, in the end, escorted as far as the little gate at the top of the lane by Peter Margett, who was quite genuinely sorry for him.

As for the bachelor, he arrived back in the little town, possessed of a not unpleasant sense of martyrdom, and spent the afternoon upon the beach pretending for himself an aesthetic nature which could find a strange sadness in the deep sparkling blue of an unruffled summer sea.

"I sliced for months at one time," Cutman was saying seriously, as Peter reached the verandah again. "I tried everything."

"Left foot forward?" The doctor threw in his question in exactly the same tone as he asked whether a patient had ever had a course of calomel.

Charles nodded.

"And, in the end,' he went on, with a grave shake of the head, "I even began facing away to the on, every time. Relying on the slice, you know!"

"Oh, that's fatal!" This from Peter, who had caught up the thread of the discussion.

"I know," answered Charles, "but I was fairly desperate, Peter!" He paused and ground out his cigarette on the saucer of his coffee cup. "The slicing disappeared in time," he added, "I don't know why— Now, of course, I'm pulling," he went on with a wry smile.

"Tried the left foot drawn back a bit?" asked the doctor; and so the eternal theme had gone the full circle once again.

"Don't you think it's much more a question of wrists?"

All three men turned in astonishment at the interruption. The strange lady had come out of the door at the end of the balcony, which led into the women's quarters, and was leaning against the rail, facing them.

"Oh, don't get up," she begged, as they started to scrape back their chairs. "It's fearfully impertinent of me to chime in at all, but, in a way—" here she gave a merry little laugh, "I met you all three, at the party last night, didn't I"

She drew up a chair to the table, and Charles discovered that it was rather pleasant to feel that she did not seem to expect this to have been done by one of them. Exquisitely feminine though she appeared, she did not require little services—and thus big services do not lose their value. Peter offered her his cigarette case (Cutman's was just too late, under the table), but she shook her head and picked up the conversation again.

"I'm afraid this is really horribly impertinent of

me," she said, "but you see, I'm fearfully keen and I'm a fellow slicer!"

After that, of course, there was no need for introductions. Deep had called to deep. Indeed there are few better ways of putting all human beings upon an equal footing than this. Discover that the butler's approaching has gone to pieces, at the same time as his master's, and you will find the true brotherhood of man. Play, in a kind and paternal spirit, a game of tennis with one whose twin pigtails tell you she is still under nursery rule; stand up, if you can, to her slashing service and her unexpected returns: contemplate the fact that the mistakes she makes are the mistakes you make—and the chasm of years, created from a sense of self-protection, will vanish. You will, after a set or two, be playing tennis with your equal; what though she disappears after the game, within the autocratic sphere of a governess, and is heard protesting shrilly against the ukase that wet shoes must be changed immediately.

So also can the barriers of sex be pushed over, by the same formula that annihilates class and age.

Thus they sat talking earnest golf for some time until Peter Margett, again anticipating Charles only by a few seconds, asked her whether she would care to make a fourth in their afternoon round.

She nodded.

"How kind of you," she said, "of course, I should love it. You see," she added, as she rose to her feet, "I am quite a stranger here!"

She turned and vanished through the door at which she had appeared, saying, over her shoulder that "she would not be a minute."

In less than that time she had reappeared, her clubs swung over her shoulder.

"I never take a boy," she said. "They always seem so small at the seaside. While you are looking for your ball in long grass, you're just as likely as not to lose your boy."

As a matter of fact the three men invariably took out caddies on the afternoon round, but this, of course, made it impossible on that afternoon.

There is no need to describe the game. Charles played with the strange lady, against the Doctor and Peter. She made a wonderfully sympathetic partner. Charles experienced an actual pleasure in apologizing to her, after putting their ball in some hopeless position. For there is an undeniable joy in being sorry, to the right person. This trivial companionship involved in being partners, unreasonably annoyed the Editor. He would have liked to have been saying how sorry *he* was. . . .

As for Owen Weare, he played his usual steady, serious game, concentrating upon it, undisturbed one way or the other by the presence of their unusual companion.

But to Charles and to Peter, the whole affair was gradually assuming the interest and the thrill of adventure. There was that quaint entry in the visitors' book—a name which was only half a name. Moreover, she had never introduced herself at all:

and that almost made her appear to have no name at all, for the majority of people, in meetings and partings, are so apt to insist upon the importance of mere names. Charles became conscious of this lacuna, while negotiating a two-foot put to win a hole and he nearly ran the ball off the green. But then, of course, Charles should not have been thinking about his partner at all, at the moment when the whole business of life was to hear their ball drop, with a pleasing clatter, against the bottom of the tin. He excused himself, enjoying the opportunity, and heard her acquiesce sunnily, in his statement about the "trickiness" of the greens. Then she holed the ball from a far corner and halved the hole.

"What a partner!" he was thinking, as she walked with him to the next tee, warning him, with a smile, that she had never yet carried the pit, but that this time she was going to try harder than ever!

And, of course, she failed. Anything else would have been intolerable. The ball, clean hit, struck the further edge, some three feet from the top, and rolled back and down—kicking about, this way and that, until it finally settled under an uncompromising piece of scrub.

"Oh dear!" she said, "what is the good of saying I'm sorry for that! It couldn't have found a more dreadful place!"

But somehow, this failure in mere strength was simply entrancing.

Owen Weare drove his ball well over the brink of the pit. But Charles clamored down, happily enough, with his heaviest mashie in his hand, and hoped more fervently than he had hoped about anything for a long time since, that some divine accident would happen and cause him to lay his own ball beside, or even beyond, Owen Weare's.

And it did.

How he managed it he did not know; he simply felt an overpowering will to shift the little white ball that lay under the shadow of that infernal piece of scrub. He may even have shut his eyes, as the heavy club came crashing down. There were stones and boulders about, and it was a risky matter to hit hard.

But, when he looked up, there was the strange lady, outlined against the sky above him, her head half turned away following the ball, and her hands together . . . applauding his effort: applauding his, Charles's effort! Then, for the first time, as he climbed up the opposite slope towards the ecstatic silhouette of his partner, he experienced a feeling of danger. Deep down, it shook him ever so slightly, like the thin, small tremor heralding an earthquake.

"Oh, a splendid shot!"

He was standing beside her, as he heard the enthusiastic words, and, maybe it was a good thing that, at the moment, he was too much out of breath to reply. It is not good for men, when they have reached the age of Charles, to experience a great

longing in the hollow of a pit, to have achieved it, and to climb out and face the audience!

This is the lure of the footlights, childish and unreasonable, but horribly compelling. And so, perhaps, it is a matter for congratulation that Charles found himself out of breath.

Then, over a stretch of springing turf, the vision, once more, of Peter and the doctor. . . .

"Hot shot!"

This from Owen Weare, intent upon the game. But from Peter, nothing. He was always, except in the convictions which coloured the paper he controlled, honest.

Now he was honestly jealous.

In this key, the game continued to the eighteenth green.

It is not profitable to try to analyse the quality of fascination, if only because its surrounding circumstances are so hard to trace. But the force itself exists, just like electricity or the weird power in the atom, but even less divined in its first causes. Indeed, its effects are practically all that are known about it.

Thus, as Peter and Charles drove against one another, up the long slope of the last hole, they both realized that, in relation to the woman whose name in the visitors' book was entered as "Mary," they were in the nature of competitors.

Their hearts beat quicker for the chase, as they had, years ago, when they snatched their wives from

the unimaginable hundreds who might have become the mates of Joan and Emily. Since then, perhaps, those legendary husbands had dwindled in number through the years, dwindled and dwindled, until now there remained only the actual inevitable one.

But at that time it had not been inevitable: rather had it been a tremendous, intoxicating gamble.

Here, again, undeniably, was that same gambler's thrill. A little disturbing, when a man is past fifty and his whole instincts lean towards the respectable: yet, for all that, impossible to refuse.

The emotion, the attraction, the desire—what does it matter how you label it?—the thing was there, established. And Charles and Peter, from whom the very horses of Hippolytus in their first ecstacy of terror, could not have dragged the information, knew it, to the discomfort and joy of their separate souls, as they panted up the slope towards the club house.

Here they came upon Alison and Harold, who had wandered up to the links for tea, and were starting out for nine holes afterwards. The young people looked at the four coming in, noticed the strange lady, and, about to hail them, hesitated. Then they realized that this was indeed Charles Cutman and Peter Margett, and shouted their greeting. Charles and Peter waved their hats in response. It was, of course, utterly ridiculous, but that meeting struck them both as a pity.

Meanwhile Alison and Harold passed on, and, finishing with the first hole, came out upon the open cliff and the sea.

"I don't know," said Alison in her abrupt way, "why we should have hesitated to believe our eyes, just because our fathers were playing with the lady of last night—it's quite absurd."

"Yet we did," returned Harold, "and, knowing our fathers, I'm not surprised that we did!"

"No," answered Alison, "perhaps you are right."

It is part of the lovable confidence of youth that every child, despite the proverb, is convinced that it knows its own father.

In their turn they had breached the pit hole, the woods behind them and the great green slope in front.

Harold turned suddenly to her.

"Alison, darling," he said, "you do love me, don't you?"

"Dear boy," she answered, "why should you doubt it?"

"Oh, I don't . . . I don't. Only you . . . your're so splendidly efficient, Alison, carrying out our ideas about it all. I'm afraid I'm not so strong as you. I have to keep on remembering the wood."

She looked swiftly round, gauging their solitude. Then she kissed him, suddenly.

"That is to help your memory, boy!" she cried gaily.

The kiss whirled him away to those wonderful moments under the silvered trees. Their wooing, tarnished ever so little by the delicate commonplace of her treatment of it, in public, became real to him again. Of course, he thought, she was right. They need share none of this ecstacy with those others. With them, the sisters and the cousins and the aunts, all that counted, all that gave them a second-hand, unreasonable pleasure, were the forms and ceremonies, the silly fact—not the miraculous, unique emotion behind it.

So thought the boy, and drove his ball lustily, far over the edge of the pit.

Alison too, opening her muscular shoulder, easily carried the distance.

As they walked up the hill, she laughed suddenly.

"I thought of a phrase last night in bed," she told him, "a phrase which pleased me, because it summed up what I mean about all the people who have and who will congratulate us. All the people who will send presents, and say it's not so pretty a wedding as the last they attended . . . oh, *all* the people, Harold!"

"What was it?" he asked.

" 'The licensed audience of love,' " she answered, solemnly, then burst into laughter.

"But of course," she added, "I realized it wasn't really a very good phrase, because it's just the kind that Daddy would love for a third leader."

She laughed again merrily.

Oh, thought the boy, this was surely the right way to win the game of life!

Had they not mastered the rules before starting to play?

His heart bounded to meet hers, completely confident in them both, as she squared herself for her second shot.

Thus youth; using the telescope of wisdom but omitting to discover at which is the right end to apply the eye.

CHAPTER X.

Some few days later, Ted Willis was sitting on the stones beside the water, leisurely mending the broken ribs of a lobster pot. He hummed to himself a queer, formless little tune, the lilt of which would defy memory, but the motif was one of sadness. So much so indeed, that at last, he set down his work and lay back upon the beach, staring up at the sky. Vague, half-discovered longings were at work in his brain, those big embracing emotions, which surged up in him now and again, carrying him outside himself, magicking him far away from the shabby deep-sea fisherman that he was. Sometimes these moods which seized him would be, as it were, maelstroms of wild happiness: happiness without a cause, absolute. Then he would sing one of those untutored but triumphant songs, which Charles and Peter had heard not many nights since. At such times he seemed to be admitted to a fellowship in the general joy of things; to become one of the immortals who have no need of a jest to make them laugh. But now the pendulum had swung the other way, and he had taken sable sadness as his mate, though there had been no tragedy to hasten their embraces. Misery and Pity, Laughter and Gladness, seemed, on these occasions, to become

actual beings, forcing him, a willing victim, into their company.

If this is madness, Willis was mad: but at least, when the fingers of that consciousness so much greater than his own frame, touched his soul, the old man was possessed of one great, tremendous impulse, the impulse to make, for sorrow or gaiety, the whole world kin. In this mood he gazed at the sky, and at this moment someone sat down beside him on the stones, as softly and as silently as those same invisible fingers had but now brushed across his second self.

"All that you hate in the sky," a voice breathed in his ear, "is the knowledge that you cannot see the end of it!" The old man, for a moment, hardly believed that the voice was real; it might, indeed, have been only an echo in his mind. Then, plunging back, from the uncharted spaces in which he had been travelling, to the irk of the stones in his back, and the splash of the waves at his feet, he knew that the voice was as real as the pebbles and the water.

He gathered his limbs together gracefully, like a sailor, sprang to his feet and pulled off his hat.

"Madam," he said, "if it wasn't a piece of impertinence in a dirty old fisherman, I'd tell you that you were a female wizard!"

The Lady of the Links smiled and threw a stone into the water.

"Long words," she said, "and strange words for a fisherman."

The sentence was almost a question. At least, to Willis, it appeared to require an answer.

"I've travelled a long way; I've lived a long time —I don't know who my father was," he said, hardly knowing how to reply.

But she seemed to understand, for she nodded, and scooped out a little hollow in the stones beside her.

"As an old campaigner," she said, "you ought to have known the value of that—" She indicated with a delicate fore-finger the hole she had made.

Ted Willis smiled and lay down again beside her, worming his body comfortably into the hollow.

"It would be fearfully rude," he said, "to tell you that you were a queer fish; but somehow I can't treat you as a lady. You know a bit too much, I suppose."

She smiled.

"On the same count," she answered, "I have not even attempted to treat you as a fisherman."

"Ah, then you know," he said, "that I am the local 'character'?"

He smiled at his own words. So many visitors had patronized him out of curiosity. The old man knew this well enough, for, unlike the cities, it is impossible to live in a village and not to know the exact role which you are filling.

She laughed.

"The incredible longshoreman!" she said. "Well, I can quite believe it, though, as a matter of fact I knew nothing at all, for I have never been here before."

"I was wondering," he returned, slowly, "why I did not know your face. 'Tis a sure thing," he went on, with one of his odd slips back into the argot of the beach, "'Tis a sure thing ye do no want my company, the same way as those others; for to them I'm a bit of local colour, as they call it, like the red on the cliffs!"

"I am afraid," she said, "that I have too much impulse in my composition. I saw you staring at the sky, and I had an idea that you were feeling mad because it's not just a ceiling, with a room above, that you know quite well."

He sighed.

"You are a wonderfully understanding thing," he returned. "I mean no offence. Maybe, that's near enough to what I was thinking, though it was less fine than the way you put it, I'm afraid. Just a mood."

She nodded smiling.

"It gave an introduction, anyway," she said. "Tell me, do you know Mr. Cutman and Mr. Margett?"

"Well enough," he answered. "They have been here every summer time for . . . is it twenty-five years, or twenty-six?—I can't remember."

"Near enough," she said, and, under her breath, "enough to explain, without anything else."

"Two very nice gentlemen," Ted Willis was saying, "you have met them?"

"We are staying at the same hotel," she returned. "What do you know of them?"

The fisherman raised himself and hugged his knees.

"No more than you, madam," he said, "if I am any judge!"

"As I thought," she smiled to him, "you are a remarkable man. I only asked, because it struck me that they were unhappy."

The old man did not move; he gazed intently at the water's edge.

"The lips of Mr. Margett and the eyes of Mr. Cutman," he murmured to himself. But she caught the words nevertheless.

"Certainly," she whispered, "I was not deceived in you. But I ought not to ask you about other folk. I should have known that you are too big a man to tell me. I am sorry."

Ted Willis rose, and turned his back upon the sea.

"I know nothing," he said. "They have been very good friends to me."

His fine old eyes fixed her, sternly.

"It is a complete answer," she returned. "But I mean them no harm."

"I know it," he answered shortly.

She looked past him, at the sun dancing on the surface of the water.

"Take me out for a sail," she said, and he bowed. This was the business of his life.

She sat beside him in the stern. All the time he was subtly conscious that this passenger had little in common with the usual people who patronised the offer of "a sail in the bay."

She talked, but her talk was not like that of those others. Her conversation seemed to come to him in scraps, like the jumbled creations of his own mind. "The sea," she had said, "is very lonely—even in a fishing boat in the bay—the sea throws you back on yourself—don't you lose the sense that you are part of a community? Don't you begin to feel the reality of being part of a universe? That's the sea."

This was the nature of her conversation, and something in himself responded to it. Her being seemed to swim within the orbit of his own. Their souls marched together; after many years, the old man felt again the elation of a great friendship.

Then he found himself once more on the beach, gazing at the sky.

His brain whirled dumbly at the suddenness of the transition. Of course he must have beached his boat, run her up the shingle with the aid of the usual shore-loungers—secured her—yes, indeed, there she was, half way up the beach. So strong then had been the personality of his passenger that all these

everyday exercises had been performed trance-like, leaving no trace upon his memory.

Nor could he remember lying down again upon the stones and looking at the heavens. Only, as his brain seemed to fall back to him out of that same sky, he did experience a feeling that someone, or something, had been very much in touch with him—purposely in touch, seeking, as he vaguely imagined, some sort of information.

Whether he had given that information, or not, he could not say. Instinctively, he hoped that he had not. Then, remembering the passenger, he was not sure that this really was what he hoped.

He looked round, half expecting her to be still beside him. But there was no one there.

He could not remember her saying goodbye to him. There was no money in his pocket. And then, his eyes ranging along the sea front, he thought he saw her, sitting under a parasol, a little way along the cliff, reading a book. The old man passed his hand across his forehead slowly. Then he collected his forgotten lobster-pot and strolled up the beach. He was puzzled.

And, in a different sense, Loveday Weare and Joan Margett were puzzled too. During the intervening days, between the afternoon foursome and the mystification of the fisherman they had reached speaking terms with the strange lady. They had, that is to say, arrived at the stage where it appeared

discourteous not to remark that it "was a hot day," or that it "looked like rain," when they passed her in the hall after breakfast. But that appeared as far as intimacy was likely to go. There was no sign of the development of the usual holiday friendship, always so keen and so complete, until, at the little junction on the main line, two separate trains seem to swallow up the different lives into their own private maws, as utterly and finally as a funeral divorces two bodies.

"You see," said Loveday, lying back in a deck chair on the verandah of the hotel, "there is something not quite obvious about her." She paused, smoothing out her skirt with fingers which touched the folds caressingly. This sense of delight, in the mere feel of things, was one of the few pleasures which no one could deny to her.

"Perhaps," she added, "that is enough to explain what is happening."

Joan shifted her position uneasily.

"You are hinting at things again," she said.

The other, with a quick gesture of the hand repelled the evasion.

"No! no, Joan," she said, that is simply cowardice."

"Well," muttered Joan, "you have so little to lose."

"I dare say. There is nothing to envy in that."

Joan's quick sympathies responded immediately.

"Oh, I am sorry, Loveday," she said. "I never thought! I was hurt."

"I know, dear. I wish I could be hurt. But I do understand what you feel. Only, is it any use not to face it? If it is, then, by all means let us look the other way."

Joan was silent for a moment, then she sighed.

"No," she said, "it is no use not to face it."

"I knew," murmured the other, "that the storm was coming, but I had no idea it was going to be complicated like this."

"Do you think," asked Joan, steadying her voice pitifully, "that they are in love?"

"Men keep that capacity longer than women," answered Loveday, "the capacity, I mean, for . . . for pretending they are still boys!"

Joan shrugged her shoulders, irritably.

"Oh, I know that," she said. "Are they . . . or do they think they are, in love? Anyway, what's the difference?" she added hopelessly.

Loveday answered slowly, as one choosing her words.

"I don't know," she said. "Not exactly in love, perhaps: but I think they are trying to recreate the . . . the original thrill, with some . . . some drug which she can give them."

Her companion nodded.

"Yes," she answered, and a world of misery escaped in the monosyllable. Suddenly, with one of

her startling gestures, she sat bolt upright, flinging her arms out above her head.

"Oh," she cried, "I wish I was Emily, comfortably blind!"

Loveday nodded in her turn.

"And Charles Cutman," she said, "is even more drugged than Peter."

Joan rose, and paced up and down the little balcony, as if caged in by invisible bars.

"Oh," she cried, at last, "I believe Alison is right, after all! She is deliberately avoiding all this by cutting out the Romance It's better to be just competent, than unhappy!"

"She has yet to prove her theory," replied the other.

But Joan was not to be comforted.

"Oh," she cried again, "what do I care? What do I care? My troubles are facts, not theories! Alison is strong and young!"

"Young enough to devise her own tragedies, confidently; just as we were!"

Loveday Weare's voice seemed tired, its tone hinted that she was not far off becoming an old woman. Joan started for a moment at the phenomenon; then, in a rush, her own unhappiness surged over her again.

"I don't care," she said. "I love her, and she is my child, but I don't care. My own affairs have come so much nearer to me than . . . her future!"

She sank back again into her chair.

"I suppose it is wrong and that I am an unnatural mother," she said. "But—again, I don't care. Not now."

She suddenly buried her face in her hands. Loveday slid an arm around her shoulder.

"Joan, dear," she said, "I—I may be wrong."

She saw the other, forcing the tears back with her palms, shake her head.

"I can't comfort you," she said, "at least, only a little. I do feel, somehow, that this woman . . . isn't quite like other women. I do feel that she is not going to rob you in quite the same way."

Joan Margett looked up, her eyes hard, almost fanatical.

"Oh," she answered, "I know what you mean. And you think I am as small as that! No! No! No! I love Peter, because . . . because he's a perpetual baby. I love him because he and I have been very, very private friends. I love him because I know, that, even if . . . if he left me for ever—he would always be really mine. If something happened to take away his body from me, for a night . . . a week . . . a month; that would make no difference. It isn't Peter's body that I love, it's Peter!"

She stopped, out of breath with her own self-revelation. Loveday stared at her.

"And I thought," she murmured, "that you too were a Victorian. I had put you at 1880 and Emily at 1845!"

But her friend, wrapt up in her own distress, had not heard.

Loveday rose.

"At least," she said, "you have realized it and you have faced it. You can't do more."

Joan turned to her and nodded. Then she sat down again in her chair, and picked up her book, opening it at the place marked.

"Sorry I burst out like that," she said shortly.

"That's all right," answered the other. She realized that this was the inevitable end to that kind of revelation; to round it off in the talk of school-girls. She realized, too, that Joan wanted to be left alone. As she passed through the open window into the drawing-room she heard the book drop from her friend's hand.

CHAPTER XI.

Here indeed was a situation, ludicrous enough! Two men, past middle-age, fighting desperately against an attack of boy's love. It was as if, at fifty, they had all of a sudden developed teething rash. For neither Charles nor Peter was foolish enough, in the beginning, to pretend to himself that this was a grand passion. Yet the emotion was sufficiently compelling for all that. It had indeed all the painful fascination which throws undergraduates into ecstacies of gloom and despair, though they have seen a face but once, nor do the chances point towards their ever catching sight of it again. But there was a difference. For the undergraduate, over-estimating his pains, is unable to value that which he is actually experiencing. He does not know that this very folly is the seed and life of romance, that this fever which he takes so much trouble to hide from the hoarse laughter of an uncle as well as the kind smile of a mother is second only to the great discovery itself, and is, indeed, a treasure to be cherished still, even after that discovery is made. The fever passes, and he is the first to make fun of the next victim. Charles and Peter themselves had suffered these things as desperately and laughed at the sufferings of others as merrily as any of their

kind. But, by reason of the disappointment and the sorrow of the waning thrill, they had learnt to long once more for the absurd distress and the ridiculous joy of irrational romance. They had learnt at last that, without this disease of boyhood and girlhood, love runs a terrible risk, the risk of becoming simply an amiable custom. Perhaps they were peculiar in wanting more. It is possible that the majority of the men and women they knew never bothered their heads to keep romance up to concert pitch. Subconsciously, it may be, most engaged couples, even on the way to church, never expect such perfection. Love does not die—oh no! they would deny this indignantly—it does not die but it dulls, becomes less violent, less tremendous, smooths itself down, by long contact, into a sweet-running, durable machine. But Charles, and Peter, too (less emphatically, because he hated to confess a weakness), loathed the idea of the machine. In both their lives their love, their women, their homes, had been the biggest, the most adventurous thing. If that adventure disappeared there would be nothing left but a yearly income and a respectable funeral, nothing left except to watch with the irritating or kindly eye of an uncle, the happiness of youngsters.

And upon the heels of this emotion, when, indeed, it had reached its zenith, the strange lady had appeared.

Somehow, in these two, presumably steadied and settled-down men, she had managed to reawaken

the romantic ambitions of the very young which do not need, but even repel any satisfaction. Thus, in the beginning, they wanted nothing of the strange lady, nothing except that she should be there and serve as the spur to their imaginations. She was simply supplying, like a miraculous fount, just that elusive emotion which had gone.

It is possible that in their own most private selves they knew this well enough, but it is certain that the knowledge made no difference to the actuality of their distress. They were as jealous of one another as two schoolboys over a rare postage-stamp. They were as shy about their condition as a woman with a child. Had they a suspicion that their wives even guessed at the affair, it is possible that, from an utter inability to tolerate their blushes being seen, Charles and Peter would have done something desperate—shipped before the mast, perhaps, and put ashore somewhere in the Pacific, gasping at their own folly, and dazed with astonishment at their behaviour.

Meanwhile, here was the embarrassing ideal in daily contact with them both. They feared its presence as much as they would have mourned its departure. And still they accepted every intimacy with it which Chance threw in their way. Charles, for instance, had played a whole round of golf with her, alone, and had succumbed, ecstatically, to that miraculous putting. Peter, secretly astonished at the weakness of his own duplicity, had pretended to

miss the remainder of the party on an after-dinner walk, and had sat, for one amazing hour, with her upon the balcony. On this occasion Charles, returning to the hotel in the rearguard of the party, with Emily's arm resting happily on his own, realized what had happened and came as near to murderous impulse as he was capable of coming. His hatred of Peter, momentary but none the less violent for that, appalled him by the intensity of its reality. He squeezed Emily's arm: a mechanical manifestation of affection, which was actually a gesture of self-defence. It was hideous to him to realize, as he felt her answering squeeze, the fearful disloyalty in his mind; still more awful, the knowledge that it was stronger than himself. At that moment his whole life appeared to him as having been a mistake. He told himself that he had missed everything, missed the whole meaning of his existence, by some ridiculous, unpreventable mistake, years and years ago. . . .

Then, the very next afternoon, alone on his way up to the links, he had come upon the strange lady again, watching the mullet over the edge of the bridge, and, half an hour late for his game, had arrived at the Club House with a ready excuse and a light heart once more.

So backwards and forwards, these ridiculous men, set and middle-aged, experienced the mad emotional see-saw of boyish adoration. Had either of them been alone with the phenomenon, he might have

stopped to think that this tempest had blown up in an incredibly short time, that he had actually only been in touch with the divinity for a very few days. He might have considered this, and, considering, crushed the whole business back into an absurdity. But the element of competition took the affair into a higher, more strident key. Both men were jealous, and, such is the insane power of jealousy, neither stopped to think of anything save the temporary advantage, imaginary or real, of the other. But jealousy between friends and jealousy between strangers are very different things. Charles and Peter had known each other intimately for years. Any prolonged pretence between them was impossible. At breakfast, on the beach, at lunch, on the links, the assumption between the two that this was the normal August holiday soon became grotesque. If all the diplomatists were friends of twenty years standing, war would be impossible. They would be driven into telling one another the simple truth, through sheer inability to deceive. Thus Charles and Peter, left alone one late afternoon in the billiard room, Loxbury and the doctor preferring the sea air, first eyed each other uncomfortably, then eyed everything else equally uncomfortably and fell to praying, each to his own god, that the other would be the first to break this extremely awkward and difficult piece of ice.

The Editor, with his passion for strength, broke it violently and completely. He banged the red ball

into a pocket, thus conclusively terminating the game; then he threw his cue on to a sofa.

"Well, Cutman," he said shortly, "what about it?"

The note of challenge lay in the surname. The barrister had been "Charles" to Peter Margett these many years. The temptation to stave off the attack by the conventional "What on earth do you mean, old man?" was overwhelming, but Charles was beyond the futility of such a remark as between these two.

He noticed that Peter had seated himself in an arm-chair and was glaring at him defiantly. He felt inclined to be theatrical, to laugh and shrug his shoulders, walking impressively across to the end of the room and replacing his cue calmly in the rack. But he could not. He found it impossible to pose, opposite that face which he knew so well—it would be childish. Besides, Peter would see through it, would know that it was only a pathetic, silly effort to gain time. After all, Peter had gone for the problem bald-headed. It was up to Charles to do the same.

"Well," he said slowly, "it can't lead anywhere, Peter, so—what does it matter?"

"Can't lead anywhere?" rasped the Editor. "You say that because you half hope that it can't. But how do you know where it is going to lead?"

"But it's ridiculous," muttered the barrister. "Look at us—two middle-aged family men!"

"Do you feel a middle-aged family man, when you are up on the cliff with her?"

Peter's voice was a positive snarl.

"Don't bark at me, Margett," returned Charles angrily. "I suppose you shed twenty years too, that evening on the balcony!"

"Well," snapped the Editor, "I'm not ashamed of it. I could have gone on in the old way; I had the strength—strength enough, at least, to school myself to it. Fate's chucked this in my road, and—it's no longer a question of just my own ideas. You say it can't lead anywhere! By God, Charles, I say it can! And because I am able to say that, my need must be greater than yours!"

He was on his feet, his eyes blazing. His challenge, his certainty that his own longings were bigger and more insistent than his friend's, fired Charles with sudden fury. Why should this man presume to suffer more than he? Why should he be crushed by the brutality of Peter's headlines, like the public whose subscriptions to his paper made Peter's living possible?

He became, all of a sudden, passionately angry.

"Damn you!" he cried. "You assume too much. I try to fight against this thing and for that reason you say that it means nothing to me! You're a fool. You are so used to imposing your absurd ideas on a public who can't answer back, that you imagine you can do the same with me. Well, I tell you, you can't! This thing has happened to you and to me

and you've chosen to rip it to pieces between us. All right, Peter, you shall! I'll have no damned headline and bluff from you. If we are going to talk about this, we'll talk straight and honestly. I'll start by telling you the truth. Ridiculous or not, I'd die—or do whatever there is that's worse than dying—for her to-night!"

The Editor did not move. Then slowly, a little wearily, he sank back again into his chair. For some moments he was silent, looking past Charles at the marking board on the wall. When he spoke, the note of anger in his voice was replaced by disappointment.

"I'd hoped," he said simply, "that you did not care so much."

"Do you imagine," returned Charles, "that I have not hoped and prayed I did not care so much?"

"Thank God," muttered the Editor, "the holidays will soon be over."

"Ah!" said the other, "then even the strong man of Fleet Street recognizes that headlong flight is sometimes the most desirable thing!"

The sneer in his voice was not disguised, for Charles was still angry at his friend's attempt to treat his own case as unworthy of serious attention. But he softened immediately, seeing the trouble in the strong man's eyes.

After all, they *were* very old friends.

"It's not so much the women," Peter was saying, "as the children. If they guessed! That would seem a bigger failure somehow!"

"How could they guess?" asked the other.

"My God, Charlie," answered Peter, "the modern girl and boy guess everything. They know nothing and they guess everything."

"If Harold's so damned wise about life—" began Charles stoutly, but the other cut him short.

"It's not that they are wise," he said, "it is that they are so confoundedly sure of themselves that they don't think they need to be wise."

This was an amazing confession for Peter, apostle of the gospel of strength. Only an emotional crisis like the present could possibly have produced such a heresy. But Charles let it go. The waters in which they were now sailing were too deep and too treacherous to admit of any fooling about with the boat. Sneers and jibes were out of place.

"And supposing they do guess?" he asked.

Peter clenched his hands.

"I'd pretty well hate to know they did," he said, "and have to carry on as a father!"

"I suppose I would, too," answered Charles. "It seems queer that they should appear to matter more than Joan and Emily."

"It is, I expect," said the Editor miserably, "that one never really wants respect from one's wife. But there is something horribly undermining in the idea of one's child finding one out."

"Anyway," muttered the other, "what does it matter? Harold and Alison are going their own road with sufficient determination, as things are."

"But if they knew this," said Peter grimly, "I rather think that it would considerably strengthen that determination."

For some minutes both men were silent. As a matter of fact, their thoughts were identical. They were looking back upon the early years of these two whom they still, in unguarded moments, regarded as children. They were remembering all those first ideas about their duty as parents, their duty to "set an example," their innate conviction that they could be held responsible for what the child might become. Now they saw that they might have spared themselves those initial pains. They knew, well enough, that had Alison and Harold wished to break every law, human and divine, nothing on earth, least of all any remembrance of the behaviour of their parents, would have prevented them. Peter and Charles knew that their children were fond of them, a sense of vague gratitude mingling with the much more valuable tribute of real friendship—up to a point. The point being that, in the eyes of the boy and girl, they were out-of-date, already set and fixed in their outlook upon life and their ideas of its conduct. And yet, though they might resent this attitude in their children, on the rare occasions upon which Alison or Harold let it slip in their conversation, they were now very loath to let it be known that, in actual fact, they were by no means fixed in their outlook and by no means to

be relied upon in their standards, out-of-date or not. It appeared far better that their children should regard them as kindly and amiable men, of the day before yesterday.

Charles, at this point in the ruminations of his mind, fell into a sudden panic and started pacing nervously up and down the room.

"Heavens above, Peter!" he said, "I never imagined a thing like this could happen! I mean—to other people, of course, but not to us!"

Peter Margett was silent, then he sat up suddenly, straight in his chair.

"The point is," he said, "that it has happened, and that it has happened to us."

He rose, facing Charles as the latter swung round to his words.

"Well?" muttered Cutman, uneasily.

"I'm cutting out Emily and Joan and I'm cutting out Harold and Alison," came the answer. "As far as I'm concerned, I'm beyond those things. To me, it seems a question between us two."

"You mean? . . ." Charles heard his own voice putting the question timidly, though he felt that he knew well enough what Peter meant.

"I mean what I say," went on the Editor, roughly. "I love this woman. You say that you love her, too. Very well. That is what is between us!"

Charles almost gasped at the sentence. There was the case, stripped naked, as Peter stripped

everything naked, and left without a shred of decency, an idea unrestrained and uncovered, but desirable.

"Yes," he said, slowly. "I love her too." As he faced Peter, seeing the glitter of a jealous hate in his eyes, nothing seemed more desirable than the strange lady, nothing more distant and divorced from reality than Emily and Harold. Unmistakeably, as he thought, this moment found the pulse of youth leaping within him, once again. Now, at least, his fingers were once more closing round all that hot and heedless romance which he had lost. Even so, he realized that Peter's case was the same, and even at this moment it struck him as strange, that in this crisis of their lives, this effort to recreate the past, they should both have lighted upon the same woman—the same ideal. Later on he was to learn the significance of this. Now the idea escaped him just as quickly as it had come, and he concentrated only upon the one fact.

"Yes," he repeated, "I love her."

And both men were certain that in the double confession was a complete denial, an absolute overthrow, of twenty and more years of respectable married life.

Charles, clinging more desperately than his friend to the standard which he had subconsciously set before himself, from the time when he had first become a man, protested against the sheer, overwhelming strength of this disaster. For he was still sane enough to regard it as a disaster.

"Peter," he said, "this is a frightful thing which has happened!"

Then he caught the Editor's eye, fixing him sternly, and knew that Peter was trying to read in his own expression whether he, Charles, was as seriously tragic in this debacle of their affections, as himself. At that moment, perhaps for the first time, he realized that this woman was the biggest thing in his life—the biggest thing that would ever be possible in his life. The sudden conviction almost threw him off his balance. His mind raced madly through the whole period of his married years, burlesquing everything like a buffoon, and arriving again at this incredible climax, settled by some queer trick, upon an old aunt of Emily's, who had to be visited at Kingston about once a year, and who was always found reading the collect for the day, sitting opposite an ivory crucifix.

Why the picture of the old, yellow face, matching the crucifix, and the trembling lips muttering the words meaninglessly to herself, should have appeared to him at this moment, he could never have explained. Still less could he have told why that picture appeared suddenly and extraordinarily funny. But it did, and he laughed aloud, startling Peter out of his concentration upon himself.

"What the Devil is the matter?" asked the Editor.

"Nothing," gasped Charles, fighting against this hysteria. "Nothing. I was thinking about us . . . and about an old aunt of Emily's. About

an old aunt . . . !" His laughter choked him again. Then at last, he conquered it, and his face became set and tragic.

"Oh, my God, Peter," he said, "we must put up some sort of a fight against it."

"Why? Why should we?"

The question came to him in the dull note in which a man expresses his dogged revolution against things that are. Charles could find no answer to it. They were men, captains of their own ships: if they counted the price and found it worth while, he supposed they could set their course any way they pleased.

"We're talking a great deal of our own feelings," he said, "we don't seem to have considered hers."

And he knew, in that sentence, that he had identified himself with their common, unconquerable desire.

"Now listen," Peter was saying, "I want you to know that this thing has come to me like the smash of a Nasmyth hammer. It has crushed out what I was, and has left what I am; what I am now, at this moment. I tell you I don't feel that any other moments matter, either gone or to come. For all I know, she may hate me, but I've got to go after her all the same! That's the way it's got me!"

Charles accepted the challenge eagerly.

"You aren't alone," he said. "You've worshipped strength so long, Peter, that you've come to think that you have a greater share of it in yourself than

you really have. That's the same in any religious mania. But I can tell you this. In the thing that has come between us, as far as I am concerned, twenty years' friendship won't count that much!" He snapped his fingers derisively. For some few seconds Peter stared at him intently, as if to weigh to the uttermost the value of what Charles had just said. Then suddenly, as if satisfied, his body relaxed. Only his lips set in a harder line.

"Very well, then," he said, "we understand one another." He turned deliberately and walked out of the room, closing the door softly behind him. And Charles stood stock-still wondering childishly at the unbelievable power of his own emotions. Now Charles was fifty-seven and Peter a few months more, but neither of them, even for a moment, saw any humor in what had just happened. Whatever may have passed through their minds when first the strange attraction of this woman stole in upon their perceptions; however much, at that time, they had persuaded themselves that there was nothing of the grand passion, nothing so compelling and destructive, in the long-forgotten emotions which had sprung into life again at her appearance, now all these thoughts were gone, swallowed up, not perhaps, so much in their individual passions, as in the clash of those passions, which had just taken place.

For a *casus belli* may be a very little thing, but once the actual battle has started, it grows as if nourished upon the food of the Gods, and waxing

fat upon conflict, becomes in no time, the greatest and most final issue in the world.

At last Charles sank into a chair, and his elbows upon its arms, let his chin fall into his hands. This then, was the ultimate result of loving and good parents, a properly expensive education, a youth filled with the accepted ideals of decent men, a marriage blessed by Holy Church, the thrill of a lawful child, and the passage of fifty-seven years!

Here he was, back at the very beginning of things. It all seemed so silly. If this was to happen, or even had it never happened, if this was possible, what was the point of all those precious lost years, during which Emily and he, for the sake of laws and customs which he felt now were in no way concerned with the individual human animal, had pretended, amicably enough, that they still lived in that state of enthusiasm, which can promise to "love, honour, and obey"—to "have this woman as thy wedded wife, to live together after God's ordinance, in the holy estate of matrimony . . . to love her, to comfort her, honour and keep her in sickness and health, and, forsaking all other, keep thee only to her, so long as ye both shall live . . ."

"Ye gods," thought Charles in his misery (for he *was* miserable, being loyal by nature and hating to break a contract) "Ye gods! Either the man who composed the marriage service was the vilest cynic ever born, or else he knew some secret about things which made it possible. And if he did," the bar-

rister found himself speaking aloud in his irritation, "he ought to have written that too. It ought to be in the prayer-book!"

"It's not in the prayer-book," a voice said in his ear.

Was this his brain, answering its own question, or had Charles indeed spoken aloud and was there someone answering him? He started up in his chair, his heart thumping at the idea of something uncanny in the room. He saw no one. Yet he could have sworn the voice was real. It terrified him to think that his own mind could have played him such a trick. Again that voice, horribly real, assailed his ears.

"Have you never thought," it said, "that many of the finest things of which men are capable, many of the loveliest gifts that have been given to them, are not in the prayer-book—are not even in the Bible?"

Then, suddenly, Charles realized that it was indeed a human voice speaking to him, and that the sound came from behind his chair. He rose quickly and faced round. Smiling to him, her hands resting upon the back of the arm chair, stood the strange lady.

"By George," he said, "You?"

Then he realized that it was a very stupid thing to say. She must have entered the room, ever so quietly, while he was sitting, his eyes closed, in the torment of his own thoughts.

"How did you know," he asked stupidly, "what I was thinking?"

She laughed in a way that fascinated him all over again.

"Men," she answered, "are so transparent."

"Are they?" he said slowly. Transparency was the last characteristic which he desired at that moment. Yet the sight of her, the nearness of her, the sound of her voice, all were whipping his brain to the point where he must tell her that he loved her, tell her perhaps more than that, tell her everything, the whole pitiful jumble of his mind, half sheer distress, half pure joy.

But somehow, out of all he felt for her at that moment, out of all the coiled struggle in his brain, no words would come.

"Then . . . then, you know?"

He heard himself stammer the question, and cursed its banality.

She answered lightly enough.

"I know lots of things," she said, and her eyes danced into his.

Had it really been her voice, which had said something, something which he could no longer remember clearly, about himself and the prayer-book and the Bible? Could that voice have belonged to these twinkling eyes and this adorable face; could it really have come straight from these very desirable lips?

Speedily, in the intoxication of simply looking at her, Charles was forgetting those few mysterious moments, forgetting everything save that he loved this woman, that Peter loved her too, and that she was here with him, Charles, alone. It became very easy to believe that this was all that mattered. In a very few seconds, indeed, it appeared obvious that this was all that mattered. The very smile in her eyes was an invitation, the very quiver about the corner of her lips was an understanding.

He discovered, with a start, that their hands were touching. The mere touch, to him, was so enthralling that he never noticed its peculiarity—the fact that it was her hand which lay over his. . . . Then again he heard her voice.

"I have told you," she said, "that I know lots of things about you. But I must back that statement up, musn't I?"

She smiled again, and Charles, drunk now with his leaping imagination, could only nod.

"What are you doing to-night, after dinner?" asked the strange lady.

He found his tongue with difficulty.

"Oh," he said, "I suppose the usual walk along the front."

She nodded.

"I shall be in my room all the evening," she said, and, to Charles, there was in her voice something maddening, like the nervous strident call of a chal-

lenge when there is doubt as to whether or not it will be accepted.

"I understand," he said, and kissed the hand which lay over his own.

"I wonder," she answered, "whether you really do!"

But Charles was feeling fine and grand, a hero of big romance, and his singing soul had no room for the subtleties of voice and tone which he might have discovered in her sentence.

She patted his hand and with a quick, friendly smile left the room.

As for Charles, his whole being surged and bubbled with triumph. So much for Peter! So much for the professional strong man: he, Charles, had felt his hand in that of the strange lady: he, Charles, had received an invitation to her own little sanctuary!

He almost felt it in his heart to be sorry for the ridiculous Peter.

After all, poor old Chap, it must be difficult for him to realize that he could never be quite so attractive as Charles! One could hardly blame him for not understanding this. And after all, they *were* very old friends. He left the room to dress for dinner, with a real feeling of sympathy for Peter. That delicious feeling of pity which comes when you are quite certain that you are going to triumph, crushingly and absolutely, over the pitied.

* * * * *

Now, Peter, at this moment, was tying his evening tie in a state of equally absurd triumph. For, upon leaving Charles in the billiard-room, he had met the strange lady on the stairs, and she had given him to understand that she might have to face a lonely evening, in her little sitting-room. Peter, as was his nature, had snatched at the hint with both hands, and had ascended to his dressing-room, taking at least three steps at a time. So he tied his evening bow, accurately and triumphantly, while Charles, not four doors away, a little late, frisked about inside a clean shirt until he forced his head through the top, with a sheer lightness of heart which expressed itself in bursts of impossible singing, where the tune vanished gurgling into a basin of hot water, and re-appeared, with unabated gusto, twenty bars later on, muted only by the dabbing of a towel.

Such abandonment Emily, hooking herself into her grey and silver tussore in the next room, did not attempt to understand.

"Dear Charlie," she murmured to herself, "he has had a cocktail in the billiard-room!"

Perhaps she was right.

CHAPTER XII.

It was ten o'clock. The door of the strange lady's room, that ugly hard-featured little room in which had taken place the merry supper-party with the thunderous atmosphere about it, was closed. Behind it, curled up on the sofa, lay the siren, smiling to Peter Margett. He stood, the other side of the table, resting his fingers upon its green cloth. But perhaps 'resting' is hardly the word, for Peter's fingers were tense, pressing hard into the rough surface of the cheap art-serge. He, at least, had given himself over, body and soul, to the blinding glamour of the moment.

"You are sure," she was saying, "that you love me?"

"Sure?" he answered. "I have torn up the ideas of thirty years, because I love you."

"Yet you hardly know me."

"I suppose," he said, "that few men know what they love, any more than why."

She smiled.

"Yet," she hazarded, "as we grow older we are supposed to grow wiser, aren't we?"

"In everything else," he answered stubbornly, "except love."

He came close to her and stood looking down at her face.

"You know," he said, "how much I love you. You know that this is nothing that will pass: that whatever happens, this is going to remain with me to the end."

"Yes," she answered quietly. "I know that. You are that kind of man. This is certainly going to remain with you to the end. Just as it has been with you all these years."

"You mean," he said, "that I have always been looking for you."

"Not quite that," she replied. "I mean that for a long time now . . . you have forgotten what I looked like. And so I suppose you started looking for me again."

"But . . ." he hesitated, "I have never seen you, never known you before. How could I have forgotten?"

"You've known me for a long time," she answered. "You've grown to know me so well that you have forgotten me!"

"I don't understand," he muttered.

"Of course, Peter," she said, "of course you don't understand."

There was a world of tenderness in her voice, like a mother answering the questions of a very small boy. Something of this quality in her tone prevented Peter from following up the thrill which the use of his Christian name had given him. He only

stared at her foolishly, just as the very small boy would have done. He saw the corners of her lips twitch in that fascinating way which they had, just before she smiled. Her hand came out and found his. Its touch was comforting—as it would have been to the very small boy—because, though he could not analyse it, there was something growing in that room, something weird—not terrifying in itself, but alarming by reason of the fact that it was outside the sphere of human control. Yes, that was it. There were deeps, deeper even than a strong man of the world, fifty-eight years old, could plumb. Things were not going quite as they might have been expected to. . . .

There was something queer, something impossibly familiar even in the touch of this hand which lay in his. One moment he wanted to cover it with quick kisses, the next he just wanted to have it where it was, listless, for ever. Without reason, blindly, he felt that the presence of her hand in his was the only thing which bound him to his own self-respect.

Certainly something was happening in that room.

Afterwards, looking back at the affair, as a man tries to analyse the first struggling moments of consciousness after an anaesthetic, he could remember little, save the astonishment at that persistent feeling of familiarity, of having known and loved this little hand for years.

He heard her voice, coming as it seemed from a long way off, right away from the sea perhaps, over

which she was looking, out of the window. He could see her profile outlined, not sharply, against the night-blue of the sky.

"Perhaps," she was saying, "I am here to make you understand."

He fancied she wore that tired, gentle little smile, which he had often seen about her lips. Her hand still rested in his.

He could not move. For some reason or other, he did not dare. Somewhere in the room, empty except for the man and the woman, was a presence that dared him to move, a presence he could not disobey.

And then he saw, saw with his own eyes, the miracle.

The strange lady had not moved, she was still sitting, half turned to the window, looking out over the dark waters.

But the face was changing. The whole figure was changing, slowly, almost imperceptibly, yet, as the moments went on, undeniably. Even the hand which lay in his own was changing. It seemed to shrink and yet to be motionless; to grow a little harder, without altering its touch at all.

Afterwards, trying to recall every second of this wonder, Peter remembered hearing the hurried tick of the little china clock on the mantelpiece. Somehow the ticking of the clock seemed to give a real value to what was happening.

Still the face did not move.

Then, all of a sudden, blindingly, he saw. It was Joan's face at the window; it was Joan's hand which he held in his.

The words that the strange lady had spoken rushed suddenly back into his mind.

"You've grown to know me so well, that you have forgotten me!"

He fell to his knees, his head upon the hand that still lay in his own. Tears, which he did not try to force back, fell upon that hand unheeded.

Now, at least, he understood.

How long he remained like that he did not know. It might have been centuries, for time and the soul have nothing in common. And if ever Peter's soul leapt out of its prison, it was now, singing, through the medium of those tears, wild paeans of thanksgiving.

The voice came to him once more, the voice of the strange lady, near at hand again. They were curious words that reached his ears.

"Thomas," she said, "must have seemed worth while, near Galilee, or he would never have been shown."

It needed the reality of the spoken words to bring Peter back to the hard-featured little room. He had been voyaging on a sea of recollections, now for the first time vivid and valued. Magically, as under the restorer's art, the picture of his life had regained its old warmth of colour, its old clarity of design. He saw, with a sense of abasement hardly

credible in so 'strong' a nature, that he had indeed "known Joan so well that he had forgotten her." She had become to him, at this moment, the dearest, most precious friend in the world: she had become more than that . . . much more; all the mad promise of the honeymoon days seemed now to be fulfilled.

Why? How? Had not he himself, in the plenitude of his wisdom, told Charles that 'there was no secret'?

Even now he realized that he did not know the nature of that secret. But those last words were still buzzing in his ears. Like Thomas, he had been shown, and he believed. Yesterday his whole editorial nature would have demanded reasons. Now, he found himself on his feet, felt the intoxication of a great joy in his veins, and heard his own voice cry out aloud, "I believe in this!"

"Yes," came in soft tones from the sofa, "that is the secret!"

Again he was conscious of his voice, as something out of his own control, explaining things.

"It is the cities—going to the office—other people's tragedies all the time—or other people's comedies. It dulls the other side of a man. All the people you meet . . . talking about life cheaply. But they never talk about their own lives. . . ."

His brain was trying to puzzle out the reason for his failure.

"It's easy to lose sight of things if they are never

mentioned. That's why people advertise. Funny! Nobody ever advertising anything that really matters . . . so, I suppose, it gets forgotten. Hell! what a fool I've been!"

He came to earth again, suddenly, regaining in part his ordinary control. Then, of course, reason became assertive, insistent. His mechanism, as a man, jarred violently at contact with a force that was not, on the face of it, human. He became suddenly ashamed of his own blind faith in the miracle. He felt that he must know what it was that had happened, if only that he might be certain of the reality of its happening. Every moment, as he looked into the eyes of the strange lady, once again their merry twinkling selves, the events of two minutes ago were becoming more incredible, slipping away fast into the unsubstantial and unsatisfactory shadows of hallucination and dreams.

Apparently she divined his thoughts.

"Listen," she said. "What happened was real. It was no effort of your imagination. All the things you live by, all the funny little things you call facts—" she spoke quickly, enthusiastically, as one about to lift the lid of a treasure chest, knowing well what was within; but all of a sudden she stopped short, with a little flashing smile. "Well, they *are* facts," she said in a more matter of fact tone, "but it's a mistake to believe that they are all the facts. And, in that matter, there is an ignorant old man on the beach who has the wisdom of the

serpent!" Now she laughed outright. "'Serpent' is rather cruel," she said, "except that he seems to have twined himself pretty firmly round the tree of knowledge, though he may be hanging on by his tail instead of his head!"

Peter's mind was still occupied with his own amazing revelation.

"Hypnotism," he murmured to himself.

"No," she answered. "No 'ism whatever. Just white magic."

"Then what are you, who are you?"

For some reason, perhaps because he found that his brain, which he had always considered a very efficient organ, was outraged by this thing which had happened to him, there was a note of indignation in his voice.

"If you ask me that," she answered, with a touch of whimsical sadness, "I shall have to tell you the truth. And that is the last thing that you will believe."

"Tell me!" he said defiantly.

She sighed.

"You ask who I am," she answered, "and the answer is easy: I am no one. No, no!" she laughed, seeing his face, "not in the society sense! I mean it literally. I have no name: I simply don't exist in that way."

She laughed again into Peter's eyes, childlike and round in their astonishment. At her laugh, his eyes became grown-up again, for he decided that she did not mean him to take her seriously.

"Then you ask *what* I am!" she went on. "You ought to know that, for you fell in love with me!"

The mere suggestion infuriated Peter now, with all his passion for Joan seething and bubbling inside him, yet how could he deny it? Their presence in the room together was living proof.

"I don't know why I fell in love with you," he muttered, "the whole thing is a mystery."

"The solution of the mystery," she answered, "lies in what I am."

"No, no!" he said. "You are everything that is delightful, of course, but——"

He hesitated, abashed.

"But," she completed his sentence for him, "you love Joan? That is why you fell in love with me."

She rose and put her hands upon his shoulders, speaking in a soft low voice, with the characteristic little smile about her lips:

"For I am Joan," she said. "All the bits of Joan that make her the most wonderful woman in the world to you: all the bits you had been idiot enough to have forgotten. And I am all the bits of Mary that make a divine fool of John, and all the bits of Kate, and Alice, and Elsie and Phyllis, right away from the Queen of Sheba to Jane, the underhousemaid. So now you know what I am, and why I am no one!"

Peter Margett took a grip upon his brain with both hands, so to speak. He told himself earnestly that it was now necessary for him to be exceptionally calm and rational. This woman was talking non-

sense to him. He must fight against the ridiculous atmosphere in that room which was making it appear more than nonsense. He never had tolerated any kind of nonsense . . . he had a reputation for not tolerating nonsense.

The fact was, he reasoned, that, as a result of some emotional cloudburst (curse Charles for this!) he had made a fool of himself, and now this woman was trying to make a fool of him. Well, in the school-boy phrase, he was too old a bird. . . .

The only thing was that there had been, undoubtedly, that strange moment with its very tangible result. He did, very definitely, desire to go to Joan and—to caress her: and he had not felt that desire for years. He discovered that his companion was still looking at him, with her queer little smile.

He smiled back, a smile full of self-control and kindliness—a tea-party smile.

"I congratulate you," he said. "You keep your incognito exceedingly well, my dear young lady!"

Now that, whatever the means, he had regained his self-respect, she had become a young lady to him. Before, he had rejoiced in regarding her as an equal. At this she laughed outright.

"You can thank your stars," she said, "that you are cured, and whether you believe or not does not matter very much now!"

He felt that he must make some apology to her for his unbelievable infatuation.

"I'm sorry," he said, "that I made a fool of myself."

Even as he said it, some deep-rooted dogma of his sex assured him that she must have enjoyed his folly. Why, any number of women simply lived for just that kind of amusement! Still, an apology was the right formula for the end of the game.

For the first time he saw a look of anger in her eyes.

"Yes," she said, "you have been a fool; I am not sure that you won't always be a fool. But, as it is, you have been a lucky fool, because you have the makings of a decent fool. If you take my advice, you'll spend the rest of your life trying to find out the enormous amount that your wife knows about you. That should keep you out of any further folly!"

Suddenly, like the sun bursting from behind a storm cloud, her mood seemed to change. She took his hand, with a quick smile.

"Man! Man!" she said. "Haven't you always prided yourself upon your strength? Then be strong enough to be thankful that you are out of the mess, without trying to pretend to yourself you were never in it."

He bent over her hand, stiffly.

"I know," he said, "that I have a great deal to thank you for. But you can hardly expect a reasonable man to subscribe to your preposterous explanation of your identity, can you?"

"Perhaps not," she answered, with a sigh, and added in a whisper. "They never do . . . poor souls."

He turned suddenly towards the door.

"Well, goodbye, lucky man!" she said. She was making his departure very easy, he thought, and inwardly he thanked her for it.

"Surely," he said, "since I have . . . er . . . got over my folly, there is no reason why I should not see you again?"

"Indeed, no," she answered. "Only the reason which I gave you and which you would not believe."

At the door he turned awkwardly.

"I can rely on you . . ." he hesitated, "not to say anything about this?"

She laughed into his distressed eyes.

"Did I not tell you," she said, "that I was the ideal woman?"

Peter went down the passage, trying hard to trample upon a conviction that he had not played a very lofty part in the last scene. Over the banisters he heard the voices of people coming in from the front. He heard Loveday Weare saying "Well, if you think so, dear," and then Joan answering very determinedly "I do!" Peter thrilled to her voice, and hugged the thrill joyously to himself, as a child, given an unexpected chocolate, sucks it slowly to make it last. He felt that he did not want to meet Joan just now, any other way except alone. He would go to their room and wait for her to come up. The things he wanted to say to Joan would sound perilously like nonsense, to other ears. As he turned the corner of the landing he heard the

door of the strange lady's room shut softly. He looked back, expecting to see her going down the stairs, but there was no one there. He shrugged his shoulders and went on. Everything this woman did, he thought, had some infernal mystery about it. Well, he imagined that was her pose. Not a bad pose, either, for a woman, if she can carry it off!

Thus the Editor, clutching desperately at the worldly wisdom on which he prided himself. It never entered his head that the click of the door might have been made by someone going in—Charles, for instance.

Peter went into his bedroom, and, sitting in the wicker armchair at the window, waited for his wife to come up. He felt much like a poacher who has heard a man-trap spring to, an eighth of an inch beneath his foot. His heart sang within him. For all that, after some twenty minutes, he began to fidget at the non-arrival of Joan. He supposed they were still gossiping, downstairs in the lounge. Still, he would not go down and see. Of one thing he was absolutely certain: that in his present mood he wanted to see Joan alone. He sat on in the armchair, smoking a cigarette and smiling fatuously at his wife's silver brushes on the dressing-table. From somewhere along the beach there floated to him, through the open window, an old quavering voice, vaguely familiar. It sang a tune, indeed, but a tune like the song of a drunken man, vague and

without rhythm. Yet the singer was no drunkard, for the words, fitting the impromptu metre excellently, came faint, but clear enough:—

"There's no pure green and there's no pure gold,
And there's no pure heart in man;
But he who believes in 'em, young or old,
Why, he's garnered all he can!

"Ye'll bet on gold and ye'll find it's paint,
(But paint may be bright an' good!)
And a wise man blesses his private saint
That he chose as a wise man should!"

Peter threw his cigarette end out of the window and watched it glowing on the pavement. Where the devil was Joan?

The song still floated to him over the pebbles, but Peter was no longer listening. He was impatient, hungry; just so had he felt, during his engagement, waiting for Joan at the gates of Kew Gardens, or at Richmond Park.

CHAPTER XIII.

Along the sea-front, after dinner, Joan had been walking with Loveday Weare. Her mind, for all its years of sterility, was still the mind which had produced unmarketable poems, was still filled with a sense of romance stronger than herself. In this crisis, all the long-suppressed heroic ideas in her rose to the surface. Peter loved another woman—you could twist it any way you pleased, as Loveday had tried to twist it—but the ultimate fact remained—Peter loved another woman. And Joan loved Peter. She had wit enough to know that there was nothing very peculiar in the situation. She had read books and seen plays—read so many books and seen so many plays indeed, that the situation might well have appeared to her to be the only one in the world. But then, she and Peter had taken their marriage seriously! They had been young in an age when the idea of an "eternal bond of love" had not become so terrifying that, from sheer self-defence, it had to be laughed out of court by the clever or the passionate.

Peter, she knew, had believed as much as she in the ideas which, for some time past, she had been learning from Alison's friends were quite

ridiculous. She had never entered into these arguments, either one side or the other; youth, she knew, was violent and self-confident, but she knew equally well that youth was often right. Only, she and Peter had seen things differently, and in their faith they must live. By the new generation they might be regarded as Druids and sun-worshippers, but, what then? There must have been many a happy Druid, many a noble sun-worshipper. The point was that this thing had happened to Peter, and, in the light of his conviction and the habit of the better part of his life, it could not be treated otherwise than seriously.

"If I was drowned," she said to herself, "he would be happy."

She never thought to ask herself how she had failed him, or why she deserved to be a sacrifice. The whole thing was part of her tradition, and the strength of it was bigger than her own intelligence, which told her that it was as ridiculous and as damnable a tradition as Suttee.

Luckily, perhaps, Loveday overheard her.

"If I was drowned," she said, "Owen would be neither happier nor more unhappy. He might be less amused, that's all."

"Well," answered Joan, "that is why you can't understand, I suppose."

Loveday sighed.

"I suppose you think," she said, "that if you were drowned, Peter would marry this woman?"

Joan nodded, her lips set.

"And do you really imagine, Joan," went on her companion, "that the act of marriage has anything to do with happiness? At least we are nineteenth century women, not eighteenth!"

"But Peter is nineteenth century, too," answered Joan, "and respectable nineteenth century."

"That means," said her companion, "that it would irk him considerably to be compelled to live with a woman he professes to adore, without a stamp on the contract?"

Joan stopped suddenly, and her clenched hands showed white against her dress.

"Oh," she said, "I may be a Victorian fool, but I can't discuss Peter like this—not even with you!" and then she sat suddenly down upon the grass at the cliff's bottom, and rocked backwards and forwards, her face in her hands, moaning.

"I wish I was dead!" she sobbed, "I wish I was dead!" And then, in great gasps, "Baby Peter, Baby Peter!"

Somehow those words seemed more terrible to Loveday than anything which had gone before. They put Alison so absolutely in her niche, the girl that was never a child. Loveday had a curious idea that this agonizing burst of maternal feeling would never have happened had not Peter strayed from the paths of righteousness. It was almost as if, by virtue of his disgraceful behaviour, Joan was falling in love all over again. . . .

Then she had a sudden fear that someone would pass and ask if Joan was ill, and that she would have to say something or other. And there seemed nothing to say, either to the possible stranger, or to Joan, still rocking backwards and forwards in the shadow. She stood irresolute, helpless. Then a familiar voice reached her through the darkness along the front.

"Of course, they entertained a good deal," it was saying, "She liked it and I daresay it was good for his business: but the end of it was they never had a meal together from one week's end to the other—except breakfast, of course, but you'll soon find, Alison dear, that breakfast doesn't count as a meal—not with men. So, in the end, when the trouble came, I always said it was due to that—always being at someone else's beck and call, you know. You can't be natural with guests, however long you've known them! Not that all this has much to do with the price of boots, but one thing always seems to suggest something quite different to me!"

It was Emily, walking home with Harold and Alison. Joan got up quickly, and brushed her hair back from her eyes with her hand.

"I'm sorry," she said shortly, and peered through the darkness towards the approaching voices as if to see how near they actually were.

"I shall tell Emily," she said, with sudden decision.

"Why?" whispered Loveday.

"She has got to share it with me."

Joan's voice was tense, even cruel.

"It is almost incredible," said her companion, "that she has not seen it."

"I shall tell her," answered the other. "I shall tell her to-night."

Then Emily herself had reached them with Harold and Alison just behind her. All the way home she babbled happily of all manner of trivial things, wondering why orange blossom was out of fashion, and remembering the childish thrill of furnishing the first home of one's very own, with a long story about a clergyman with a 'sweet' face whom she had wanted to officiate at her ceremony and why he couldn't come: with all the details of the birth of twins, who must now be over thirty years old. So they reached the Hotel without Emily realizing that, for the entire walk, no one had spoken a word except herself.

In the hall, Joan had whispered to Loveday again:

"I am going to tell her now!"

And Loveday, though she herself could see no sense in disturbing the placid stream of Emily's mind, had only been able to answer:

"Well, if you think so, dear."

To which Joan had replied firmly:

"I do."

This was the conversation which Peter had heard

as he stood on the landing and on which he had gone straight to his room to wait, hungrily, the coming of his wife.

Alison and Harold started arguing, in the hall, on some point connected with their programme for the morrow, and Loveday, who always put off going to bed as long as possible, sank into a chair beside them.

Joan started up the stairs with Emily.

"I want to talk to you alone," she said suddenly.

Emily nodded calmy, and Joan found herself unaccountably surprised.

"In my bedroom, dear," said Emily, and never uttered another word until she was comfortably seated in an armchair near the mantelpiece, opposite a photograph of Charles which she always carried about with her, and, having unhooked her dress and eased her corsets, had swathed herself in a torn and faded lavender dressing-gown.

"It's fearfully shabby," she said, as Joan sat stiffly on the edge of the bed, "but, when I bought it, at a sale—St. Thomas', Westminster,—it was—it was really a bargain, quite apart from the charity. Genuine Japanese embroiderv, but of course it's all worn now!"

"You can see it was good silk," answered Joan dully.

She felt that there was something diabolically cruel in disturbing this placid mind. What she had come to say appeared to her now as much better

left unsaid. She heard Emily's voice again, trivial, without modulation.

"Well," it said, "I've worn it for twelve years . . . no, thirteen. I remember that sale quite so well—in December, it was . . . " and, without any change of inflection, she went on, "I suppose you want to talk to me about dear Charles and Peter?"

The unexpected remark hit Joan like an electric shock. She sat up stiffly on the bedside, and her hand, as if seeking support, found the mahogany knob at the bottom.

"Yes," she answered. "That is what I came to talk about."

Emily rose, a shapeless rustle of silk, and, all in a moment, Joan discovered a fat, motherly arm about her shoulders, and a queer spreading body beside her, on the bed.

"My dear child," Emily was saying, "you haven't really been *worrying* about them, have you?"

"Worrying?" she echoed. Was it possible that Emily was so foolish that she was incapable of the imagination to take in the significance of this thing, even after she had guessed at its existence?

"I remember a dear old uncle of mine," Emily went on "who lived in Radcliffe Gardens—no, not at the time I'm talking of, he'd moved to Edwardes Square. Such a queer old thing. He had hairs growing out of his ears, and he used to try to singe them off with a match when he lighted a cigar!"

She chuckled suddenly at the memory of this uncle. As for Joan, she felt that she would scream unless Emily's flow of words simmered down into something reasonable.

"What was I saying?" asked her companion, suddenly helpless, as usual.

"An uncle," murmured Joan, automatically.

"Oh, yes," said Emily, "he hated fogs."

Joan waited for her to continue, but nothing happened. Apparently, to her own satisfaction, at any rate, Emily had explained what she had meant to say.

"What's it all got to do with Charles and Peter?" asked Joan.

"Don't you *see*?" said Emily, and then in a tone of patient remonstrance, "I suppose I haven't made myself clear. I never do, my dear, somehow or other. It's really a terrible affliction, because, almost always, I know quite well what it is I want to say!" She paused, and put her finger to her lips, like a child thinking hard. "Now what was it," she went on, "that Uncle Ronald used to say, which I wanted to tell you. Oh, I know! He used to say, especially on foggy days, which I told you he hated, that the chief difficulty of London was to keep on remembering that the sun was there all the time, though you never saw it at all! Well, I was a girl at that time, round about seventeen, so of course I looked for a second meaning in poor Uncle's remark, though I daresay he never meant

anything of the kind, for if ever there was a stupid old man . . . " she broke off quickly. "However," she said, "he's dead now and has the advantage of me. What I mean is, I can't prove he was stupid, and it may have been me. But he used to fuss so if the ornaments were out of place on the mantelpiece: *really* fuss, I mean, so that people felt uncomfortable: and, my dear, the amount of time he wasted on his food! I used to warn Charles when we were engaged . . . "

She broke off suddenly, striking her hands together in a little gesture of irritation.

"Joan," she said, "I'm going scampering off again. Why don't you stop me? The whole point is what Uncle Ronald said about the sun being always there."

The effort of actually capturing and pinning down the point, like a butterfly, appeared to have exhausted Emily entirely, for the moment. At any rate she stopped talking and sat silently at Joan's side, regarding, with a faint smile, the crinkled yellow and green paper in the fire place.

"Do you mean," said Joan, slowly and deliberately, "that you don't care?"

"My dear!" Emily's voice was charged with horrified protest. "Of course I care! Only,—oh, I'm so bad at expressing myself . . . You see, in a way, I love Charles as I love God. I couldn't have said that when I was a girl; it would have upset everybody so. I think people who believe in

God are much more human about Him nowadays; finer, in a way, perhaps. Anyway I *can* say that, now. What I mean is, both are very largely a question of faith, don't you think, like all great friendships. And the more I've thought about God, since I stopped having to learn the collect for the week, the more I've thought it's all a question of an amazing friendship. And trust is always behind that, isn't it? You can't help remembering, as you get older, lots of things God has done for you—things one called luck at the time. That's only slang for God, don't you think? And remembering things like that is very nearly all there is in friendship, I believe. Well, I can remember lots of queer little things Charles has done for me, lots of them too little and silly to repeat, but they all proved him a real, real friend. So you see, I trust him, like one does trust friends, whatever kind of terrible mess they may fall into. And Charles, somehow, is much too much of a baby ever to be really wicked."

She stopped, smiling again at some stored-up remembrance of Charles' babyishness.

"But that," said Joan, "is just exactly what I say about Peter."

Emily nodded contentedly.

"I suppose we all do," she answered. Joan reviewed in her mind the long list of platitudes which had been Emily's confession of faith. Perhaps there was more vitality, more strength-giving power in

these simple commonplaces than the intellectuals, whose iconoclastic smartnesses, to which she was wont to listen round her tea-table, gave them credit for. At any rate, here was Emily facing possible disaster with a serenity which no longer appeared the child of simple foolishness.

"I thought, perhaps, that you had seen nothing," Joan murmured at last.

"Of course," answered Emily, "of course I have seen. And, in a way, I suppose, anything might happen. Yet, all the same . . . "

She broke off, stealing a sidelong look at Joan. The tragic lines about her lips, and the questing eyes, full of pain, touched all the emotions of Emily's great store of motherhood. She slipped her hand over Joan's.

"My dear," she said, "of course I know I'm a stupid old babbling woman, and I can sometimes almost *see* people not listening when I'm talking, so I daresay everything I think is really very silly; still, I *do* think things all the same. Now you've always been clever, so you've always been thinking about clever things, like books, and pictures and even politics. And of course they are all very necessary, I daresay, and quite a good thing to know about—though even dear Charles secretly likes detective stories best! But they arn't important, are they? I saw you reading a book about the Renaissance in Italy two or three days ago, and then that time I came to tea in May it was Walpole's Letters,

and somebody told me you had read the whole of the Golden Ass, which I've never heard of, and Alison says you know a great deal about the Roman Empresses. So there you are! I mean, Joan dear, that you sit here knowing all about Italy and Mr. Walpole and the Ass and the Roman Empresses, but what's the good of them to you? You're quite as miserable as if you'd never heard of the Ass, like me—just because something has happened which has never happened to you before."

Joan said nothing and Emily went on.

"I've never contended with the Ass or the Renaissance, because I know I haven't the brains. So I've had time just to think of silly homely things, and to go on liking "Excelsior" and "Won by Waiting," privately, because if you mention things like that, it gives people opportunities, like the pitiable woman in green trousers whom dear Harold brought from Chelsea, when he was going through that phase!"

"Dear, dear," she broke off, suddenly. "I'm running away again. What I'm trying to say, Joan, is that I don't believe we are happy because our husbands are ideal men, or that they are happy because we are ideal women . . . "

"We thought so once," interjected Joan.

Emily nodded.

"Of course we did. That's the 'Excelsior' idea! It's that which makes us happy. Charlie being made capable of idealizing a foolish thing like me

and me able to idealize him, when I suppose, really, he . . . "

She broke off again.

"There now, she said, "I can't find a single real fault in him. That's what I mean."

Joan nodded slowly.

"You mean," she said, "that the real ideal is not in the object but in . . . the idea. The capacity for having an ideal . . . and you think that the secret of life is to remain in touch with that capacity at all costs."

Emily cocked her head a little on one side, like a bird. She pursed up her lips and frowned a little.

"Perhaps that is what I mean," she said, "only though I can't explain it, it is something that sounds simpler than that to me."

"Then what will you do, Emily," said Joan deliberately, "if Charles goes . . . goes off with this woman?"

"I don't know," answered Emily. "It would just make the whole of me seem useless—I know that's a thing that simply revolts you modern-minded women, but I can't help it—that's what would happen to me. Only, I don't believe in it any more than I believe that the moon's going to fall splash into the bay, tonight. No, Joan, it's no use to say that I'm idiotic; because, there you are, in a hideous state of doubt, wishing you were idiotic yourself!"

"Then you aren't afraid?" said Joan slowly.

Emily rose and drew the old dressing-gown about her:

"No," she said, "I am not afraid."

"I envy you," said Joan, from the door. "I am not sure yours isn't the right philosophy."

"It's not a philosophy," answered Emily, "it's me." And she added simply, "Do you know, I've often been glad that I'm not clever."

"It isn't being clever," cried Joan. "It's not being clever enough—only just like the bubbles in boiling water, doing all the show part. And yet," she added, "I don't think I've ever been quite like that."

"Of course not, dear," said Emily,, "if you were, you wouldn't be afraid, for other reasons.'

Joan, shutting the door, came suddenly back to her.

"And knowing all you know," she said, "when Charles comes back here tonight—into all this intimacy which was such terror to us when we were engaged, Emily—when . . . when bed became a kind of nightmare to us which had to be conquered by our love . . . when he comes back here tonight, what will you do?"

Her hands were trembling as Emily took them in her own.

"I've told you, dear," she said, "that I'm a silly old woman. I shall just go to sleep and, half way through the night, Charlie will roll over quite un-

consciously into my arms, as he always does: and that's how he'll wake up in the morning. There, Joan, I've told you one of my most private secrets—because I'm fond of you! Goodnight, dear!"

She held Joan's hand for a moment, and Peter's wife went out without another word. It was not in her nature to treat Peter like this. She walked along the passage to her own bedroom, her mind undecided, revolutionary. One outstanding fact remained with her, insisting that she should look at it, like the blatant fire of an electric advertisement. Emily, that living shrine of inconsequent folly, could look this disaster unflinchingly in the face. Emily had resources which she herself had never taken pains to collect. Before her door, she hesitated, her fingers round the handle. It was going to be quite impossible, she felt, to disguise from Peter any longer all that she knew. Her nature, though in a different way, was as downright as his own, and her love, no less intense than Emily's, was not of the kind which, at such a juncture, clings fast to faith and can let the fact slip by.

To-night Peter would have to know. She opened the door softly and went in . . .

Below Alison leant over the banisters and gave Harold a good-night kiss. Then she stood back, her hands on the rail, and looked down at his upturned face.

"Harold," she said, "we agreed that ours should be a common-sense life, didn't we?"

He nodded.

"Well," she went on, "here we are, faced with the first of our problems, which we've got to learn to discuss without sentiment. What do you think of our respective fathers?"

Harold looked quickly about him, before speaking.

"It seems to me," he said, rather pathetic, "they should be old enough either to know better—or worse."

Alison nodded.

"Exactly. If they were abandoned, lecherous old gentlemen one could sympathise with them. As it is, they are respectable middle-aged fathers, and their present position is entirely due to the fact that they started a pace of sentiment which they never had an earthly chance of keeping up. Now you see, Harold," she added triumphantly, "exactly the sort of mess which you and I are avoiding about twenty years hence!"

He nodded.

"You are always unanswerable, darling," he said, "so I suppose that you are always right."

She laughed.

"I know that tone of voice, Harry!" she said, gaily. "I've heard it from your father. It means that one has made a conceited remark. Well, if confidence is conceit, I'm full of it!"

"And with you by my side, Alison," he returned, "I'm full of it too!"

"Dear Harold!" she said, her eyes shining. "Do you know, there's no picture I love more to make for myself, than the picture of us two, as strong . . . as strong and unbending as two steel bars!"

"Steel?" he echoed. "I've never heard love compared to that before."

"I daresay not, Harry," she answered. "But you've heard of the bonds of love, haven't you? Well, what makes the strongest kind of bonds we know?"

She laughed again, and shook his hand, much as a man friend might have done, to say goodnight. Harold just had time to kiss the back of her hand before she withdrew it.

"Unanswerable," he said, "as usual!" He followed her with his eyes as far as the turn on the landing, but his desires and his love followed her further still, beyond any bars of mere steel into a region so mystical, so full of unknown dangers that he dared not face it. He crushed these things back, pinning his faith to the virile confidence of Alison. Poor Harold! try as he would, he lacked a great deal of modernity. Something in his nature was always trying to persuade him that there was bigger game to be had in his life than mere efficiency.

CHAPTER XIV.

As Joan closed the door of her bedroom behind her, she became aware that Peter was in the room, although, coming out of the lighted passage, it was some moments before she actually saw him. But Peter, whose whole being had been intent upon the opening of that door, was on his feet and half-way towards her, before her mind had registered anything except that she was face to face with her problem. Then, something in his face, in the humility of his gesture, shocked her: shocked her in the sense that it was utterly unexpected, like the calm, unreasonable faith of Emily. It flashed through her mind that Peter was going to confess his infatuation, that he was going to grovel and be sorry, comforting his own passions by the open admission that he had failed her. Joan knew well enough that there is a certain self-pride in every confession of sin. She experienced a desperate hope that Peter would confess nothing, that he would not knock away from beneath him his own pedestal. That would be shameful: an act which would make it hardly important enough a pedestal, for her to knock down herself. And now Peter was close to her. His big hands stole round her cheeks and framed her face. And in his touch, there was some subtle

contact which threw her reason right out of the fight, so that she seemed to slip back to some period, separated, by the mere test of time, by many years, but always apparently, by some miracle, potentially present. Breathlessly still, but (again the miracle), no longer fearfully, she listened for his words.

"My girl. My very wise, patient girl!"

She stood limp, revelling. It was a long time since she had heard the soft notes in Peter's strong voice.

"Little Joan Funk!" he went on, with a happy rippling laugh. "That's what I called you in the canoe at Somming!"

"And you," she said, "were Peter Rash."

"I lived up to my name," he answered, "but you never did."

And she realized, with relief, that this was all of his confession. She could not have borne, at that moment, to hear Peter abase himself. And now, too, she understood that something unexpected had happened, something which had thrown the whole machinery of the situation out of gear. But the situation seemed no longer to matter. Peter had thrown back to that other man who for many years had been a memory, a memory by which the wonder of Peter had still lived on with her, though who can say that it had not been growing, albeit unconsciously, more anæmic while the original picture slipped further and further away? At least, however, it had not grown so feeble, but this single moment could bring it to life again, as vivid, as

joyous as ever. She felt young at his touch, as if her very body had followed her flying mind, back through the years—and she knew, by Peter's touch, that he, too, was feeling young. She closed her eyes, as women will, when they are entirely happy.

"Oh, Peter," she murmured, "have you fallen in love with me—all over again?"

"If I may," he answered.

Her heart beat fast with excitement. In his answer she read, not only that the old romantic desires were alive once more, but that Peter even wanted to woo her again . . . to woo her, Joan, not many years removed from an old woman. What magician's wand had touched Peter on the shoulder, and given him the priceless knowledge that no woman ever loses her desire to be sought! The question flashed through her brain, only to be flung out immediately.

It didn't matter! It didn't matter!

For it was his voice she heard asking her whether she was too tired to sit on the balcony with him for a few minutes. It was his hand that drew her towards the open window, and tenderly placed behind her neck the garish cushion in the wicker chair. It was his chair that moved stealthily nearer to her own, as she sat still and silent, in the deep quiet of an unbelievable joy—and, when the big light over the front door was suddenly eclipsed, as the Jubilee clock struck twelve, it was his arm that slipped round her, in the kindly darkness, drew her from her chair to his own, and with a gentle shy-

ness which hinted nothing of ownership, held her upon his knee and against his breast, ridiculously proud, amazingly happy.

"It is a dream," she murmured to herself.

Then she felt his lips wandering about her hair.

"Yes," he answered. "It's a dream, dear. I have never valued dreams enough. This time it will be different. We are not going to wake up."

She slipped an arm round his neck and sighed.

"Baby Peter," she whispered contentedly, then snuggled closer, and, from sheer happiness, fell asleep. Peter was not ashamed at the tears which stood in his eyes. The night hid them from the world, while his soul hugged them to himself. He felt her soft body breathing, like a child's, against his own. He heard the caressing murmur of the sea upon the pebbles. But the night was very dark. He could not even be certain of the bold outline of the great white cliff. Everything seemed to have conspired to make the world a little private place for him and Joan. And at that moment Peter's reason deserted him for good. He even found himself well able to believe the strange Lady's explanation of herself—that explanation which he had described as preposterous. The trite old quotation came into his mind: "There are more things in Heaven and Earth——"

"And especially in Heaven," murmured the Editor, ending his thoughts aloud.

CHAPTER XV.

Thus Peter and Joan accepted the miracle. Perhaps they realized that this thing which had happened would not bear talking about or dissecting: that it was a gift, more valued perhaps because not altogether deserved, to be accepted with the same glad wonder as the gift of life itself. Vaguely enough, in after years, Peter, whose passionate reason ever refused to be completely denied, did try to philosophise over his own good fortune. The conclusion he arrived at was that the perfect lover must fall in love twice—once in the divine glow of gambling youth, and, years later, once again—with something very akin to that original glow, but with a finer appreciation of its divinity, and a more stable affection for the girl who had once called so loudly and absolutely to the boy in him. The Editor, having arrived at this conclusion, even thought of writing an article about it, but decided that he believed in the idea too much, to be able to make it convincing in his paper, and wisely refrained. As for Joan, whose brain also would not be denied, she poured forth the full measure of her joy in verse—verse that, by reason of her intense feeling, neither scanned nor rhymed, though, without doubt, it contained more sheer colour in its lines than many a

professional poet achieves in a life's work. But, just as Peter abandoned the idea of his article, so Joan tore up her verses, content to accept so wonderful a gift, without attempting an expression of thanks.

As for the immediate effect upon her, when she woke up, hardly daring to imagine that this was anything but a dream, and discovered a new Peter, or rather the old Peter, beside her, it was natural enough. Her thoughts flew to her daughter, and all the misgivings about her engagement, which had been submerged by the imminence of her own troubles, rose to the surface again. As for Peter, he was quite definitely shy of appearing at the breakfast table. He was silly enough to imagine, like any love-sick youth, that everyone would read his infatuation in his face. He therefore arrived late in a state of absurdly loud and forced heartiness. He proposed various plans for the day, which to the surprise of Loxbury and Doctor Weare, included no interval for golf—and, in the back of his mind, he was tortuously planning how he might spend the greater part of the twelve hours alone with his wife. Charles, too, curiously enough, seemed to have no special inclination towards the links, and, for some odd reason or other, refused to catch Peter's eyes. However, in spite of the machinations of her father, Alison bore Joan off to the usual morning on the beach and Emily and Loveday Weare followed in their train. The Doctor and Loxbury went up to

the links alone, and so Peter and Charles found themselves in the very last position they desired, that of forced companions for the morning. As the Editor rose from the table he stole a glance at the table where the strange lady was used to sit. Her chair was empty and its emptiness afforded him a strange feeling of relief. Turning back, he just caught Charles in the act of looking away quickly from that same chair. Peter very nearly laughed. Poor old Charles! He could have the field to himself, now. Only, of course, Peter Margett could not tell him so: that would involve giving away happenings too private even to be whispered. He heard the others, in the hall, fussing about towels and bathing costumes. Curse it! He would have liked to have been fussing too; anything rather than being condemned to a whole morning with Charles alone.

"Might as well sit outside somewhere?" said Cutman, and Peter nodded assent. They found themselves walking down that part of the beach which lay opposite to the hotel. Peter, with all his years of journalistic experience, had never known himself so bereft of words. Was it possible to spend the morning with Charles, without broaching the subject of the strange lady? That was the only thing which appeared to him, at the moment, as being of supreme importance. He could not help remembering his last conversation with Charles, upon this point, and came as near to a blush, as he

had for twenty years, when he called it to mind. It seemed now like a scene in a very cheap drama. He would have to remember that Charles was still in that absurd state of mind. A few yards of shade, beneath the side of a boat, caught his eye.

"Here's a place out of the sun," he said, "let's sit here and smoke the best pipe of the day."

Charles grunted assent and they settled themselves upon the stones, leaning uncomfortably back upon the receding timbers of the boat.

"Somehow or other," said the barrister, after a pause, "I didn't feel like eighteen holes this morning."

"No. Nor I," answered Peter, feebly.

"Heat, perhaps," volunteered the other.

"I expect that's it."

The Editor, in his inmost self, was damning the futility of his reply, at the same time as he cast about desperately for some possible topic of conversation. He realized that banalities such as these could not proceed for long between Charles and himself, friends of twenty years standing, without either hysteria or violence.

Charles was going through exactly the same agony of mind, wondering how on Earth he was going to avoid, through a long morning, any reference to the lady who had been the cause of that scene in the billiard room, now so obviously and ineffably ridiculous.

A long silence obtained between the two men.

Charles shifted uneasily, and, with a half-formed thought that the action might make him appear more natural, picked up a stone with his left hand and attempted to throw it carelessly into the sea. Unfortunately, his brain being occupied with more important matters, he released his hold upon the stone too soon, and it went spinning away at a right angle to his body, disappearing, some twenty yards distant, over the bows of another fishing-boat.

Peter sat up sharply.

"Look out, Charles!" he said, "what on earth are you doing?"

"Went off unexpectedly," muttered Charles. As no agonized screams of pain came from the other side of the boat, and no outraged and furious figure appeared from behind her, Peter leant back again, though the sudden feeling of alarm, which he had experienced, left him irritable.

"Damned silly thing to do!" he said crossly. "You might have killed someone."

"I tell you it went off unexpectedly," repeated Charles.

"Then all I can say, Charles, is that if you've got so little control over your muscles, you'd better give up throwing stones."

Peter was, as a matter of fact, extremely thankful for this opportunity of irritating Charles and making any attempt at confidences between them, less likely, thereby. He therefore put into his voice a great deal more venom than he felt. But Charles,

being, as he was, in a state of happiness not one iota removed, in sheer idiocy, from Peter's own, refused to be annoyed.

"Something has upset you," he answered cheerfully, "and I think I can guess what it is."

The Editor turned sharply towards him.

"I've been a fool in a certain matter we know of," went on Charles awkwardly—"I might as well admit it to you. It's more honest—and, besides, I'd like to."

Peter stared at him. He had thought that he had the essentials of the situation between them well defined, but this remark was quite foreign to his expectations. Since he could hit upon no immediate answer, he fell back upon a demand for explanation, couched, as he hoped, in a tone sufficiently uninterested as to excite no suspicion of anything but polite mystification.

"You mean?" he queried, digging his walking-stick into the stones.

"I saw her last night," said Charles, obviously ill at ease, but determined to make a clean breast of things to his friend. "I had an idea that I saw you along the passage, as I went into her room, and, after what happened between us, Peter, I expect it galled you to see me going in there. I . . . I can quite understand it galling you horribly—only . . . it's . . . it's awfully difficult to explain this, Peter—but, it needn't worry you a bit. That is . . . not in the way you think."

He broke off, and Peter, half recognizing the truth of what had actually happened, was capable of nothing but silence. The barrister, sturdy even in his embarrassment, continued.

"What I mean, Peter, is that, as far as I'm concerned, that's all over. I might just as well tell the truth, because in this case, the truth is . . . is just about the most wonderful thing that has happened to me since the . . . the laburnum tree I told you about. Only, just the fact that it is all over, is all I need really tell *you,* except . . . ."

At this point Charles became more awkward than ever and started to play, pointedly, with his watch-chain.

"Except what?" echoed Peter, who, having now guessed everything, could find nothing to say.

"Well," answered Charles, slowly, "You know, old man, that I'm not of the preaching kind, but I'm not sure that you might not find it worth while . . . that is, I know I'm the last fellow to give advice to anyone—but . . . well, I'm not sure that chaps of our age won't find something much better by looking behind 'em than by looking in front of 'em!"

He broke off suddenly, and was silent, as shy of his own remarks, as a schoolboy betrayed, unexpectedly, into a confidence. The Editor also remained silent. He was so annoyed at the idea of Charles giving him the very advice which he himself had half thought he ought to hand out to the

barrister, that he simply could not find anything whatever to say.. This had the unfortunate result of emboldening Charles.

"If I thought," he said, "that you were the kind of fool who would imagine I had got up on a sort of moral throne and started chucking warnings at you, I'd not say another word. Only I really have got an idea, Peter, that you and I . . . er . . . turned up the wrong street together. I mean, that when you said there was 'no secret' you made one of your few howlers, old chap. Fact is," he added, with a little nervous laugh, "that the . . . the laburnum tree is really every bit as wonderful as when you first caught sight of it, even if you go and transplant it to your own front garden, and pass it every day for years and years!"

"Those arn't your own words, Charles," answered Peter. "That is what she said to you."

Charles turned quickly to him, startled.

"And so," went on the Editor, "she did it to you as well!"

And suddenly he began to laugh, because Peter really possessed a keen sense of humour, and he saw now that, however amazing the miracle, however splendid its results, it had, like everything else, its very laughable side. Charles regarded the paroxysms of his friend, first with annoyance, and then with real alarm. Not unnaturally, since he had not yet guessed the truth, he could see nothing funny in the situation.

"What the devil is the matter with you, Peter?" he said, and then as the Editor's laughter in no way abated—"Very well, if you see anything to laugh at! . . . Only, I may as well tell you, that, it was only because you are an old friend, that I felt I ought to say anything at all about it to you."

Peter pulled himself together quickly and laid a hand on his companion's arm.

"No, no, Charles," he said. "There isn't anything to laugh at really. It's more a case for a 'Te Deum,' and I know it. Only . . . only, you see—" and his voice shook again—"I must have come out from the operating-room only thirty seconds before you went in!"

"She asked you to come to her last night, as well!"

Peter nodded.

"And what would have happened," went on Charles, "if we had both arived at once?"

The other shook his head.

"I don't know," he answered, "but I have sufficient belief in her, to imagine she would have found some way out of the situation."

Charles nodded, in his turn.

"What is she?" he whispered suddenly, "a hypnotist?"

The Editor countered with another question.

"What did she do to you?" he asked.

"Nothing very much. She looked at me, Peter, and smiled and just . . . talked! Queer thing

was that I began to feel a fool almost immediately. And—a queerer thing—she seemed to know all about the laburnum tree and any number of things about Emily, which I ought to have guessed ages ago. I suppose that is what happened to you?"

Again Peter shook his head, but without a smile.

"No, Charles," he said, "I am afraid I was a harder case. I'm never going to tell a soul what happened to me. Oh," he added, in a tone of admiration, "she gauged us both marvellously—the disappointed sentimentalist and—the—the would-be strong man."

Normally, Charles would have taken immediate offence at these words, but, at the moment, his mind was too much occupied with his own thoughts. He hardly heard what Peter had said.

"She puzzles me," he murmured to himself, "I can't imagine who she is, or where she comes from or how she has got so much . . . so much . . ." he hesitated and Peter broke in.

"Inside information?" he suggested. "Why, Charles, do you mean to tell me, you never asked her?"

"Asked her?" queried Charles vaguely. Evidently the idea had never entered his head. Certainly the barrister's had been an easier case than Peter's.

"Why, did you?" he went on, intensely interested in Peter all of a sudden.

The other nodded.

"Oh, yes," he said, "I asked her." The intona-

tion might have warned Charles that the answer to the question had been unexpected, but he missed it.

"And she told you," he asked, "who she was?"

"No, Charles," answered the Editor. "She told me that she didn't exist at all!"

"Good Lord!" said Charles, "what on earth did she mean by that?"

"Last night," returned Peter, "I thought it was a playful way of telling me that she had no intention of giving herself away. This morning I am not so sure."

"Not so sure?" echoed the other. "Why, good heavens, Peter, what on earth do you mean?"

But what Peter meant was not destined to appear at that moment. A medley of voices sounded behind them, breaking in, with the startling suddenness of an explosion, upon the extreme privacy of their conversation. They caught only a jumbled sense of it.

"Hold hard, Ted . . . Blast . . . eh, what's that? Bide a bit, I tell 'ee—what's that? . . . Now, all together!" And then in a kind of tense shout. "Nao! hold hard, I say! . . ." followed by a sudden shifting of the boat behind them and an equally sudden jerk, as she stopped. Then the familiar voice of Ted Willis himself, calm and authoritative. "Steady all! What's the trouble, Walter?" After which, the voice of Walter, in the complacently protesting tone of one who has seen something, which others have missed.

"There be a couple o' blasted fools sitting under the side of her. I seed 'em. We'll crack their heads like seaweed pods, in a jiffy, shifting the boat!"

Charles and Peter realized simultaneously that the blasted fools referred to, were themselves. They got up quickly, meeting the four or five heads now peering round the stern of Ted Willis' boat.

"Sorry," said Peter, "we had no idea that you were going to run the boat down."

"Deaf as weasels!" protested the voice of him who had been addressed as Walter, but Willis, as usual, swept his hat from his head with the gesture and the smile of a courtier.

"Mr. Cutman and Mr. Margett!" he said, in a tone which combined, most felicitously, a note of welcome and surprise. "So it is my property that has provided a piece of shade for you this hot morning? Very proud, I am sure."

Charles smiled to him.

"We've been trespassing," he said, "at least we can pay a fine by lending a hand!"

They joined with the fishermen and boys, in shoving the boat down to the water's edge. She was a heavy craft, broad in the beam, and, when her bows lay in the surf, caressed by the little waves, as if they were trying to tempt her out to sea, her sponsors, in the launching, were mostly out of breath.

"Is the sun too hot, gentlemen," said the fisherman, "for me to tempt you out with me?"

The invitation was welcome to them both. Men hate nothing more than being forced to exchange confidences, however old and tried their friendship may be. In the boat they would have the advantage of the chilly influence of a chaperone. They jumped at the idea.

"Then perhaps," said Willis, "you will get in now? We can shove her out well enough, and London-made trousers don't stand the salt water too well!"

Ten minutes later the beach had become impersonal. They looked along its stretch, to the little white bathing tents under the great cliff, with the same vague feeling of superiority of position, with which an audience regards a play. Such is the great gulf created by a quarter of a mile of sea.

The old fisherman sat in the stern, smoking the pipe which seemed as much one of his limbs, as his legs and arms.

"Lobster pots?" asked the Editor suddenly.

The old man nodded.

"I've a dozen," he answered, "half a mile out from Sanscombe Rocks."

They sailed on in silence for another fifteen minutes.

"There's a couple of lines under your feet, Mr. Cutman," said Willis at last, "and a bit of bait in a mug, you'll see. If you've a mind to throw a hook overboard, maybe you'd earn your breakfast!"

"Right O," returned Charles and busied himself

with the tackle. He trailed the line carelessly over the side, letting it slip slowly through his fingers. Peter, as the boat slid beyond the limits of the bay, let his eye range along the coast appreciatively.

"What's the use of talking of the Mediterranean?" he said. "There's no coast to beat Devon, on a day like this. Look at the sun picking out the red and the green!"

"It's a gay, fine coast," assented the fisherman, "but in the South the picture's different. There the colour is in the water, don't you think, sir? It's a great show, but it changes every hour. Here's a picture you can rely on—like an old, tried love, it is. It will never let you down. Maybe that's why I, who have seen the world, sir,—and many a coast so fine that you catch your breath as you see it—maybe that's why I still like Devon best."

"I daresay," began Charles, "that there is something in that. But all the same . . ."

His sentence broke off abruptly and, with no apparent explanation his body shot so violently across the side of the boat that the Editor grabbed his left arm.

"What the devil are you at, Charles?" he shouted.

"All right!" came the answer from the barrister, straining over the side. "Get a hold on this line!"

The fisherman threw the tiller over, bringing the boat round towards the struggling Charles. Peter, by this time, was hauling upon the line.

"What on earth has happened?" he said. But the barrister was now back in his seat, looking at Willis.

"I was jolly near pulled out of the boat," he said. "Can't imagine why the line doesn't break!"

"Take the tiller, Mr. Margett," said the fisherman, "and we'll see what's at the end of that line. Keep her turning towards the pull." Peter obeyed orders, as Willis came down to Cutman's side. His brown hand slipped out along the line, till it was under the water.

"You've the wrong line," he said, then, turning—"Make her fast round the seat, sir!" Cutman did as he was told.

"It's a wonder she's not snapped, all the same," the old man muttered. "Follow the pull, Mr. Margett, follow the pull! It all depends on you, sir, whether we see the sea-serpent before the line snaps!"

He chuckled to himself, straining gently at the taut thread running into the water.

"What bait did you use for this monster, Mr. Cutman?" he asked.

"Why," answered the barrister, excitedly—"Just a slip of mackerel, from the tin! What *is* it, Willis?"

"Ye'd not catch a whale with a piece of mackerel, Mr. Cutman. Maybe it's a mermaid that's missed her breakfast. Hand over, Mr. Margett, or she'll snap the line,—she's away off, under the boat!"

Suddenly the line sagged and grew limp in his fingers.

"There!" said the barrister. "It's gone."

"I don't know about that!" answered the fisherman, pulling in the slack line, cautiously, while his eyes rested on the water some twenty yards away. A little patch, bubbling and seething, appeared on the calm sea, like a miniature whirlpool.

"That's your fish, sir," said Willis. "Look hard, for I'm afraid that's about all we're likely to see of him!"

A long, glistening back turned over just above the water, and disappeared incredibly quickly; equally instantaneous in its appearance and departure was a huge tail. It hit the water with a great smack and threw up a little column of spray. Then the sea closed over the victim, silently.

"Good Lord," said Cutman, "is it a porpoise?"

"No, sir," answered the old man, "he's a blue shark."

"A shark!" said Margett, "taking a slip of mackerel!"

The fisherman laughed.

"No, sir," he returned, "The poor fellow is even more astonished than Mr. Cutman. He's been foul-hooked."

The line tightened again.

"By George," shouted the barrister, with the sudden enthusiasm of a schoolboy, "can't we land him?"

"We can try, sir. But's a marvel the line has lasted so long."

Even as he spoke it became slack again, and the old man pulled at it hard. There was no resistance. He hauled in the broken line, coiling it deftly round its frame.

"He's away, sir," he said, "with a silly little hook in his side that will make him the laughing stock of every self-respecting blue-nose in the channel!"

He put away the line and resumed his place at the stern.

"Pity," said Margett to his friend, "that you can't take him home to Emily."

Charles laughed, as if Peter had made a very good joke. But, as a matter of fact, he would have liked exceedingly to have taken the shark home to Emily. He knew that Emily would have been rather thrilled—whether it was foul-hooked or not. He looked sideways at the Editor and gave another little laugh.

"I hardly think Emily would have appreciated the gift!" he lied, and heard Peter chuckle. Of course, he thought, Margett was not the kind of man to retain this kind of enthusiasm.. He had to admit to himself that it really was a schoolboyish kind of idea. But then superiority, of any kind, is mostly on the surface. Underneath . . . but Peter, even after twenty years, could not be admitted underneath. Charles, gazing at the ripples, racing past the side of the boat, wondered whether there had ever been such a thing as a friend who could

be admitted underneath. Peter, anyway, had too little sympathy with any kind of weakness. Meanwhile, the Editor, smoking a cigarette by his side, was actually engaged in wishing that *he* had caught a shark, rather bigger than Charles', which he might lay at the feet of Joan. Also, like the barrister, he was admitting to himself the childishness of such a wish, and thinking how impossible it would be to tell Charles of so ridiculous an idea.

The business of the lobster-pots cut short these ruminations, and interested the two men for some minutes. In due course, they were on the beach again, had thanked Ted Willis heartily for his hospitality, and were on the way up to the hotel, for lunch. The old man followed them up the beach, with his eyes.

"'Are they unhappy?' she asked me," he murmured, and then with a chuckle—"I reckon she knew well enough!—an' now something's happened to 'em . . . Mr. Cutman was as keen as a lad for that shark!"

He coiled a length of rope round his arm and looked at it meditatively.

"You're an old man, full up with a deal of queer ideas," he said to himself, "but—I wonder whether you're right this time? If so," he added, "she'll be back—back where I believe she came from, by now!" Then he was silent for a moment, and threw the coil of rope into the bottom of the boat. After which he stood up, shaking his head, like a dog shaking off the wet.

"Willis," he said, sternly, "if you're old fool enough to think in fairy tales, why don't you write 'em and earn an honest penny!"

He strode up the beach. By the rusty old windlass below the promenade, he stopped and shook his head.

"There's others," he murmured, "foul-hooked to an idea, like Mr. Cutman and the shark; maybe they'll spend most of their lives trying to land it—but the line's got to snap in the end. Better for them if it goes at the first tug, I'm thinking!"

He turned on his way and disappeared up the little village street. A young fisherman, eating his bread and cheese on the beach, jerked his thumb over his shoulder, and addressed his companion, an older man, with a thin, ragged moustache.

"Old Willis is breaking up," he said. "'E's started talking to 'imself! That means 'e's started talking moonshine."

The other shrugged his shoulders.

"I've been on the beach fifteen years," he said, "and I've never known old Willis when 'e weren't queer-like. Nobody knows how old he be—nor, for that, do anyone seem to know him any better than the next man."

He spat contemplatively.

"Always been the same," he added, and pulled his hat over his eyes.

"Reckon he's just an old fool, then," rejoined Youth, carelessly, and spat ever whit as efficiently as his Elder.

CHAPTER XVI.

It is a commonplace to say that women have no sense of proportion. That is only to affirm that they are less apt to be calculating, than men. A sincere woman considers less the expediency of her actions than a sincere man. She looks straight at her problem, in the light in which it would appear, were it set in ideal surroundings. Women, in fact, actually guide their lives much less by the rules of things as they are, as by their own private ideas as to what they ought to be. Hence, the generalization, common amongst men, that all women are idealists to the point of stupidity.

The entire romance of Joan's life, which she had for a long time looked upon as lost (long indeed, before such an idea had even started to be a disturbing element in Peter's existence) had come back to her. The immediate result of her own happiness was the same as it is, in the case of most human animals—she wanted to share a bit of it— a little bit of it, with someone else. Whether this emotion springs from the old Greek idea of insurance against the wrath of the gods at over-prosperity, or whether as one may be allowed to hope, it has its origin in an innate kind-heartedness within everyone, is a question each must settle for himself, according

to his own experience of human motives. The fact remains, that it is the most ordinary form of reaction, after great happiness, and, in the case of Joan, what more natural than that her mind should turn to her daughter, beginning the very experiment which, a very short time hence, had seemed to the mother little but a chimera, which lived faintly on, only by virtue of its original enthusiasm? She had spoken to Emily that morning, not of those moments with Peter on the balcony, for those were sacred, but just to tell her that things were not as she had imagined. Emily had smiled to her and nodded. "No, dear," she had said, and had added, inexplicably, "I always thought she had nice eyes." Confirming to herself, perhaps, her own unreasonable faith in things. Then Joan had mentioned Alison, and had hinted to Emily that the engagement of their children was curiously unlike their own. Emily had admitted this, a puzzled frown upon her forehead. But the frown had disappeared almost immediately, as she answered, "Charles feels that too, only he says that they are both very modern, and will grow out of it." With which explanation she appeared to be perfectly satisfied. But Joan was not made in such a way that she could lean absolutely upon another. The bald, business-like attitude which her daughter had taken up towards her engagement, alarmed her all the more, now that she had found, as she thought, justification for the romanticism of her own wooing.

They arrived back at the hotel some three quar-

ters of an hour before lunch and Alison, who had come to her mother's room to borrow some cold cream, was standing before the glass over the fireplace, patting her hair into shape with almost masculine carelessness. Joan sat in the armchair looking at her.

"Alison," she said, suddenly, "are you quite certain that you love Harold?"

The girl stiffened; immediately on the defensive.

"Of course," she said, carelessly, "Why?"

"Only, dear," answered Joan, "because it . . . it doesn't look like it!"

Alison turned slowly away from the glass, and, avoiding her mother's eye, walked across to the window. Her heart was beating fast, for here was the beginning of the fight which she had known must come sooner or later. Well, she knew the methods she had always meant to adopt when the moment came. Attack, smashing—even cruel, if necessary. She was young and she believed in herself: and, if she crushed every loving relation she had in the world, she felt that she was right, so long as she kept this belief. She turned and faced her mother. "It would be waste of time, mother," she said, "to pretend that I don't know what you mean. The great thing is, don't you think, that I should be straight with you?"

Joan nodded.

"Of course, dear," she answered, her brain fighting hard against her heart, which was shouting to

her that it was going to be a terrible thing for a daughter to be "straight" with her mother.

"Well, then," said Alison, "in the first place I don't think that it has anything to do with you or with Dad. My engagement is none of your business!"

That was a good clean, smashing blow to lead off with, and Joan felt it almost physically, as if Alison had actually hit her. But she was brave, and she smiled and nodded. Her mind, almost against her will, was telling her that her own mother—that queer old woman in a stiff cap who seemed now to belong to another age—had been very—very difficult about *her* engagement. The fashion then, of course, had been to treat one's parents with respect—but, after all, she had been every bit as determined as Alison. Perhaps it came to the same thing in the end.

"You see, mother," Alison was going on, "I am young and so is Harold. There is no reason whatever why we should handicap our lives by trying to graft the ideas of old people upon our own."

"I am not so very old, Alison," said Joan, quickly, like a fighter who, hard pressed, puts his hands up quickly to shield his face.

"You're not an old woman," returned Alison, "but when you talk of engagements, you are talking of the engagements which happened before I was born. Naturally, because that is the only kind of engagement you know. But, you must see, that you

might just as well, from my point of view, give me a lecture on the marriage customs of old Babylon."

The mother managed another smile. She must not, she told herself, take this second blow too seriously. She supposed things looked like that to the young.

"After all," Alison was saying, "it may be as well for us to understand one another. First of all, mother, though of course I'm fond of you and Dad, I don't feel I *owe* anything to any relation I have in the world. A debt which can never be paid till the creditors are dead, is an absurdity. If there is one distinguishing feature about the present generation, it is a refusal to subscribe to absurdities. That is why I say that my marriage is nothing to do with any of you. If you like to go on being friends with me, after I'm married, it will be splendid. But, if there's any sort of silly trouble, I'm not going to bother with it. Why should we, Harold and I? We're trying to make our own lives, and that's difficult enough in itself, without the perpetual brake on the machine, caused by relations who have, as a rule, failed to make anything of their own. If I and Harold hurt anyone's feelings, in the course of working out our own salvation, it's a pity, but it will have to be. What's more, we are sound enough to expect our children—even to hope that our children will do the same with us!"

Joan, reeling under the torrent of words, saw an opening, and hit back.

"You've not had a child, yet, Alison!"

"If part of the disabilities of having a child," answered her daughter, "is that one loses the sense that one's duty is to let it alone, to prevent it being clogged by other people's sentiments, other people's religions, other people's prejudices—then I can only hope that I shall always be sterile!"

The very words her daughter chose to use seemed to hurt Joan. But still she managed a smile.

"You're giving me a long lecture, Alison," she murmured. "But I haven't really said very much, have I?"

"That's just hedging, mother," returned Alison, quickly, "I know perfectly well that you don't think there is the usual amount of sentiment between Harold and me, to make up the mixture which you have been taught to regard as love. Well, I can only repeat, that that is our business!"

She came away from the window and sat upon the edge of the bed.

"You, and your generation, mother," she went on, "tried the other way. Your engagements became conspiracies amongst your friends to produce an Arabian Nights atmosphere of romance. I daresay it's a very pleasant form of opiate. Perhaps it's worth the disillusionment. I don't know; and I never shall know, because I never propose to try it!"

"Disillusionment?" Joan's laugh was unnatural, for she could not help realizing that there had in-

deed been disillusionment, only last night magically dispelled. Still, she managed to smile again, as she added.

"What on earth do you mean, Alison?"

The girl rose and came and stood before her mother. She looked down at her fixedly with her clear, honest grey eyes.

"Look here, mother," she said, "you don't think children are blind, do you? We don't talk about all we see, for the same reason as we don't expect you to interfere with us, because it's none of our business. But of course, we *do* see. Harold and I have realized for some time what has been happening to our fathers, and have wondered how it was going to turn out!"

Joan stood up, suddenly, her eyes bright with anger, even though she recalled Loveday's mention of this possibility.

"How dare you, Alison?" she said.

The girl's eyes never faltered.

"I had just as much right to say that to you, mother," she answered, "as you had, to talk to me about my engagement."

"Do you think so?" returned Joan, coldly. "Your ideas are very peculiar." She turned away towards the dressing-table, struggling against the insistent idea that Alison's logic was disturbingly correct.

"To you, mother," answered her daughter, "my ideas are naturally peculiar. I expect the ideas of

the man who first thought of an iron ship were considered peculiar, by his mother." Joan answered nothing. She stood at the dressing-table, her back to her daughter, her fingers tapping upon the linen cloth. Alison's voice came to her again in a gentler tone.

"It's not that I don't love you, mother. But, one must separate love from any kind of slavery."

Joan turned.

"Do you think you can separate love," she said, "from some sort of slavery? You will be very clever, if you do. Ah, Alison, you talk a great deal, dear girl, but you've not had to do much, or to give much, yet!"

For some reason these words angered Alison.

"Oh, I see," she flashed back, "you think that I'm just talking: that I wouldn't back up my words by my deeds? Then let me tell you, mother, that I would, that I have! Harold and I became engaged in Testleigh Woods, that night—that was where we knew we loved each other and knew, too, that when we came home, there were going to be lots of people who were going to knock the cleanness and the brightness off our love, by silly conventions and foolish talk. And so, mother, because I wanted him to know that my love was much more real than any church could make it, I offered myself to Harold, that night, in the wood, before anyone knew, except our two selves!"

She stopped, breathless. She had said more than

she had ever meant to say. But she was not in the least ashamed of the adventure in the wood—rather the opposite—and she tossed her head proudly. Her mother turned slowly towards the chair, so slowly that the movement appeared unnatural. Her hand seemed to go out towards its arm, blindly fluttered for a moment, then found it. Joan sank slowly into the chair. She did not dare ask whether Harold had accepted that offer in the woods. Vaguely she felt that, somehow or other, she must keep her daughter's confidence, must try to appear at least as if she understood these new ways. She was, at the moment, only anxious that Alison should not start justifying what had happened, with that terrible flow of biting words. She managed a smile and a little nod.

"I see, Alison," she said in a low voice, "I see your point of view."

Alison crossed and kissed her on the forehead. She knew that she had hurt her mother, but she still thought that it was the only thing to do. But Joan hardly felt it. She heard the gong for lunch booming below and saw the outline of Alison's strong, obstinate head, as she slipped from the room.

Still she sat in the chair. From the very first moment of the fight, Alison had started hitting her. She had been virtually beaten, half-way through. But not beaten sufficiently to satisfy Alison. There had remained the knock-out, and she had taken it.

She sat limp, in the chair, till her brain began to tell her that her absence from lunch would be remarked upon.

Then she dragged herself slowly to her feet. . . . It was at that moment that the door opened and Peter came in, childishly agog to tell of the adventure with the shark. He had the same dazzling smile upon his face, which she had seen that morning, for the first time, after twenty odd years. The smile cheered her, enthused her again, much like the sponge and the towel of the second in the corner of the ring. But, as she went to meet him, she felt her legs trembling and giving way beneath her, just as if she had really and physically received that knock-out blow. The next thing she knew was that she was in his arms, that his right hand lay upon her head, and that, between tears, which she was trying hard to restrain, she caught a glimpse of his terribly large Victorian watch-chain.

"Your grandfather's watch-chain! Your grandfather's watch-chain!" she sobbed hysterically: "She would call it the key to the whole business!" After which she found herself laughing, and wondering why the sound of the laugh was all wrong. Then, after a long interval, as it seemed, she was on the bed, with a handkerchief, soaked in eau-de-cologne round her forehead. The voice of Peter seemed to come from a long way off. It sounded very firm and kind and comforting.

"No, dear," it said, "you will not go down to

lunch." Then she must have been talking, she thought dimly—and with a quite vague feeling of terror, wondered how much she had been talking. . . .

His next words were reassuring.

"It is the heat," he said. "That bit of beach at the bathing hole is an absolute suntrap."

He fussed away to the dressing-table, replacing the stopper in the scent-bottle, and aimlessly straightening brushes and trinket-boxes. Joan could not help a little smile, despite the turmoil of her mind. Dear, dear Peter! He was so obviously enjoying his effort to be of use. Oh yes, he was the old "baby Peter," all right!

Then the thought came into her head, that she must certainly go down to lunch. She had a quick vision of Peter, telling the assembled company that she had been overcome with the heat: another flash showed her Alison, with the beginning of a smile upon her lips. And now, frankly, she did not care whether Alison's theories were right or wrong. She only felt, and felt strongly, that she had beliefs of her own, standards of her own, all of which were just as important as those of Alison.

She must certainly go down to lunch! The idea of surrender was still intolerable to her, even after that last terrible blow. Moreover, Peter must not know anything of Alison's amazing confession. Confession? no, it had sounded more like a slogan. Her mind raced away with her, at top-speed. She

imagined whole life-times, as Peter fussed at the dressing table. Supposing there was a child—a child, who had already started life; a child of that madness in the wood? Her brain buzzed round dates and calculations. It might be possible, she thought, to fake things . . . with luck. But of course, some people would talk—women would talk. That would be awful: and still more awful, the few who would deliberately *not* talk—Loveday Weare, for instance. Joan actually shuddered as she thought what the silence of Loveday would feel like. . . .

Then her mind, like a ball thrown from a great height, seemed to leap back again, not quite to where it had started, but to a point not far below.

After all, this hypothical child . . . it would be a real baby . . . a little girl or a little boy.

If now, it had started it's being, what right had she to begin to load it already, with her own prejudices? No. No. If there was anything criminal in the affair that would be it. The child, of course, must be regarded as just a child.

Above all, Peter must know nothing about it. There he was, smiling at her over the end of the bed . . . dear old Peter!

And perhaps—probably, even—there was no child.

Fearfully illogical, that this probability took the whole affair onto a plane of far less importance—but it did! Joan could not, at that moment, pursue

the ethics of her emotions. The great thing was that dear, violent Peter should guess nothing.

She smiled to him and saw his eyes twinkle.

"Better, eh?" he said "I thought that bandage would do trick!"

She smiled to him again and he came to her and slipped an arm round her shoulders. It was nice to feel Peter so loving . . . but she was glad, for all that, that the language of smiles is not easily read. For, though it was actually the very thing which was wanted at the moment, her smile had come, simply because Peter was really rather a darling, standing there at the end of the bed, thinking he had been efficient with his bandage.

She roused herself quickly and squeezed his hand.

"Dearest old fuss-pot Peter!" she said, and slid to her feet, off the bed.

"Of course, I shall come down to lunch!" she added, and started to repair ravages at the glass.

CHAPTER XVII.

Lunch proceeded as if nothing had happened at all. Certainly, there was no hint in the behaviour of Joan, that twenty minutes ago, her own daughter had outraged convictions which had become almost part of herself. If anyone appeared a little on edge, it was Alison, who felt a curious disinclination to catch her mother's eye. But Joan, apparently, made nothing of it, and fell in with a suggestion that they should take their tea to the top of the white cliff, with the mild enthusiasm which she always displayed, on these occasions.

As a matter of fact, she was suffering intensely, more intensely, perhaps, than she had ever suffered since the long labour, mental and physical, which had heralded Alison's appearance in the world. But Joan, as has been said, had, by reason of an early discovery that she was apt to any disturbing things, schooled herself to suppression for many years, and now this discipline stood her in good stead. Moreover, she recalled a remark of Loxbury's, made at the inception of that very picnic, the end of which had found her daughter and Harold Cutman in the, to her, accursed wood.

"Shock tactics!" he had said, in his lazy drawl. "It is the method of the younger generation!" The

remark had been occasioned by the eager insistence of the young people upon the undertaking of the expedition; but, as Joan recalled it, the idea seemed to her to have a deeper significance, to be a truism that covered a greater field than the bachelor had ever imagined. And, besides, she felt that the biggest necessity of all was to keep this secret to herself. For this reason, therefore, it was her business to smile—and so Joan smiled.

Charles and Peter decided to play a round of golf, while the bachelor and Owen Weare, who had taken their exercise in the morning, elected to join the party for the cliff.

"And I warn you two lads," said the doctor, in his most cheery voice, "that the heat, playing golf, is killing!"

"Must have one more round," answered the Editor. "Tomorrow, we all go back to our respective factories!"

"It's been a splendid holiday, anyway," said Emily, "and I'm sure we all look much the better for it."

"Quite apart from the fact," added the Doctor with a courtly little bow towards Alison, "that two young people have discovered the wonderful treasure of Romance!"

And then, because it seemed the obvious thing to do, everyone smiled and drank to the health of Harold and Alison. But those smiles! If only someone could have read them: for they were in-

deed, like so many different messages in code. Loveday Weare's smile, her sadly cold and ironical blue eyes fixed upon the genial mask of the doctor: Joan's smile, bravely trampling upon doubt; a smile which was almost a prayer for her daughter's happiness. Loxbury's smile, debonair, courteous and quite worthless. Charles and Peter with would-be parental smiles, but, wondering, privately, whether this discovery of Romance had been attributed to the right explorers. Emily alone, perhaps, wore a smile which had nothing behind it, except faith and good-will.

So lunch came to an end and Charles and Peter found themselves on the way to the links. They played a few holes and then, mutually agreeing that it was too hot, even for golf, sat down under the shade of the belt of woods.

"She's gone," said Charles, all of a sudden. "I asked the porter, just before lunch."

"So did I," returned Peter. "She left very early, apparently."

Charles nodded.

"Yes," he said, "just disappeared into thin air, as far as we are concerned. Isn't it curious to have become so intimate with another human being and not even to know her name and address!"

"I am not sure," said the Editor slowly, "that we should ever have become so intimate with her, if she had given us her name and address."

Charles looked at him sharply.

"Look here, Peter," he snapped, "what the devil are you driving at? You hinted at some curious idea on the beach, too!"

Peter was silent for a moment, then gave a little shrug of the shoulders. He answered Charles' question by another.

"Can you imagine that woman telling a lie?" he said.

"No," pondered Charles, "I'm not sure that I can. Why?"

"Because, Charles, as I told you, she said that she did not exist, and besides . . ."

He broke off, seeing all over again the miracle that had been done for his sake.

"Yes, but damn it, Peter . . ."

"Very well, if she does exist, Charles, she told a lie!"

Cutman swung round suddenly towards his friend.

"But, good heavens, Peter! you're talking absolute nonsense! Even if she did say that, it's just a . . . a figure of speech."

"I daresay," answered the Editor in a tone much more humble than it was his wont to use in argument. "It is quite possible that I am talking nonsense. One can only speak according to one's own convictions."

Charles' voice sounded positively awe-stricken, as he listened to this suggestion of his hard-headed friend.

"You don't mean, Peter, that you think . . ."

The other moved, with a little gesture of irritation.

"I don't know," he said, "what I think. I don't know that I care much. She has given me something that is priceless, Charles, and I am afraid I can't think much beyond that."

The Barrister nodded, and for some moments was silent, nervously plucking up little handfuls of grass and throwing them at his shoes.

"It's an amazing idea," he said, at last. "I'm trying to see it. I suppose we were attracted to her by the very qualities we had forgotten in Joan and Emily . . . she would represent all that part of them which had got hidden, so to speak, under the years."

Peter nodded. Charles had come very near that explanation of herself which the strange lady had given to him, and which he had, at first, so lightly dismissed.

"Probably, as you say, Charles," he returned, "I am talking sheer wild nonsense—but then it is very nice to feel again the inclination to believe in nonsense. That's another bit of what she has given back to us. And yet I don't know . . . we are rather apt to use 'nonsense' as a synonym for all the things we don't know. The more I think about her, the more I can't help feeling that she knew a wonderful amount about . . . about the beginning of things."

Charles nodded.

"But why," he asked, "do you speak of her as if she was dead?"

"I suppose," answered the other, "because I am convinced that we shall not see her again in this life. Anyway, not just that 'her.' After all, that is all that death means to us." He paused for a moment then went on quickly, like a man who has made up his mind to say something which his instincts tell him he should keep to himself.

"I . . . I think she knew, Charles," he began, shy as a schoolboy. "I think she knew. About the way we all start, I mean, the way we are all treasure seekers in the beginning . . . pitched into life one way or another, but all convinced that there's hidden treasure, somewhere."

"Yes," murmured Charles, "That's true enough; it starts when we are children."

"I rather think," said the editor, "that she knew it went on long after we were children: and I think she knew where that treasure was!"

Charles had fallen beneath the spell of Peter's sincerity. He had never heard the editor talk so earnestly before. He nodded, eagerly, and even discovered, with a shock, that his hand was on Peter's arm, and that Peter, the unemotional, had not noticed its presence.

The editor went on, as if to himself.

"Yes, I think she knew where it was. Not in Emily or Joan, Charles. Not in you or me. But in Emily's idea of you, which must, so to speak, be pulling you up a bit higher than yourself, all the

time. And your idea of Emily . . . working the same way. And so with me, and Joan. *That's* Romance, Charles! not the servant girl, who marries the Marquis, as we publish it in our serials, but just two ordinary mortals, living together, and believing in one another. It's that capacity in us . . . that amazing possibility in the human animal—it's that which she knew—it's that which is the Undying Thing!"

And then, as suddenly as he had torn the veil from his naked, grateful soul, the curtain of Good Form appeared to him, menacing in its insistence, and he crowded back into the zareba of his private mind, like so many women of the east, all the children of the miracle, which had broken out of prison for those few moments.

But Charles, deep in his own thoughts, did not notice the sudden shrinking of his companion back into the Peter Margett whom the world knew.

"And yet," the barrister murmured, "very little really happened; not nearly enough, one would have thought, to give us this amazing feeling of . . . of certainty!"

"Nothing happened, Charles," came the answer. "That is the whole point. You don't think that any human woman, just talking, could have put back into you and me, all that . . . well, all that practically makes us light-hearted when we think about it? It is just that which convinces me that when she said she was nothing, she spoke the literal truth!"

"Nothing?" echoed Charles, his chin sunk in his hands.

"Nothing, as far as human intelligence is concerned. Damn it, Charles, think of the number of things that influence our lives—ideals, thoughts and convictions which come from nowhere; prejudices which you couldn't trace to any source in a hundred years. Those are the things which sway us—which make up what we call our personalities. If you want to try them, by the test of touch and sight—or name and address—you're done! But, there they are all the time—nothing, but everything!"

"Yet," answered the barrister, slowly, "we did see her and we did touch her."

"We believe we did. She knew that we were sufficiently gross to make that belief necesary for our conviction."

"You seriously mean, Peter, that you don't think that woman is anywhere now, at all?"

"Anywhere? Well, no. Not anywhere within what you would call the meaning of the act."

And then Peter Margett shrugged his shoulders, helplessly.

"I've told you," he said, "that I don't know what I think. The thing is, that something came out of her being . . . her entity—something quite apart from anything she said. That something has been given to us. I don't care where it came from: I've never believed in God, Charles, not the matins and evensong God—but I do know that there are

God-like emotions and God-like ideas which can be the property of men—I know it now, anyway!"

He rose and picked up his bag of clubs.

"Come on," he said, "let's carry the pit and regain our faith in our muscles. I hate giving myself away. Reserve is one of the tenets of my gospel of strength. I wonder what strength really is!"

He strode off to the tee and Charles followed.

Queer mixture, old Peter. Now, who would ever have imagined . . . and, yet, wasn't it just possible that he was right? Only, if so, well . . !"

Charles banged his ball three yards, to the lip of the pit. It began to bump slowly down to the bottom. He disappeared after it, cursing happily.

CHAPTER XVIII.

Trunks, suit-cases, and packages were being loaded up on the crazy eminence of the station omnibus. Everything had been counted four times by Emily; on each occasion the result had been different and she was now starting all over again. Mrs. Honeycott, standing at the top of the steps, had twice sent the porter round every bedroom, to discover whether anything had been left behind. Charles, who had never, in Emily's eyes, grown old enough to be trusted with a return ticket, had several times taken them from his waistcoat-pocket to assure her that they were really there, and had, at last, handed them over to Harold, a procedure which, for some reason or other, had the effect of comforting Emily completely, so far as they were concerned. Loveday, meanwhile, sat patiently inside the omnibus, her two aquamarines gazing steadily, as it appeared, upon nothing. The Doctor was up and down the steps, in and out of the little hall, everywhere at once, pretending to help. Alison had been assuring Emily every five minutes that there had been no mistakes made, but now she had given it up and was whispering to Harold, "I believe she enjoys it!" To which Harold, remembering countless fusses of his youth, nodded in the

affirmative. It was the end of the holidays; just such an end of the holidays as had happened now for twenty-six years. Just such an end, with a difference. Charles and Peter stood some fifty yards below the omnibus, on the very edge, in fact, of the big stones at the top of the beach. They did not speak. Apparently, they were just looking at the sea.

Then, tramping slowly up the incline of the beach, an old man approached them, a string of fish hanging from his right hand.

"Then it's good-bye, Mr. Cutman and Mr. Margett, until next year?"

"Afraid so, Willis," returned Charles. "We're feeling all the better for the holiday, anyhow."

"Ye look it," returned the old man, shortly, and smiled apparently for no reason at all.

"What's the joke, Willis?" asked the editor.

"No joke, sir, at all," replied the fisherman. "I was only remembering something that I told Mr. Cutman and which he did not believe."

"What was that?" asked Charles.

"That miracles, sir, are very apt to happen when most you need 'em."

There was a silence, and then Charles' voice broke it suddenly.

"Are you a wizard, Willis, or what are you?"

At that, the old man could not resist the theatrical sweep of his battered hat from his white head, and the courteous, semi-ironical bow which he knew so well how to execute.

"I'm just an old man, sir," he answered. "But, because I'm a bit lonely, perhaps, and because I've made a mort of mistakes, I'm not sure the gods haven't let me in to one or two secrets."

"Look here, Willis," began Peter, having made up his mind that this was an occasion for dignity, "I think you ought to know that, in my opinion, your comments . . ." And then he stopped, discovering that he had not really formed any idea as to what Ted Willis "ought to know."

Charles was a little embarrassed, more perhaps at his friend's attempt at grandeur than by anything the old fisherman had said. He held out his hand shyly.

"Well, au revoir, Willis," he said, and was thankful for the anxiously shrill voice of Emily, calling him to the omnibus.

Some excited squeaks on the steps of the carriage. A slamming door. Mrs. Honeycott waving a handkerchief. Ted Willis's brown hand in the air. The infernally bumpy surface of the station road. The train—seeming, to Londoners, amazingly short and queerly old-fashioned. The red-haired guard, who is apparently immortal. Labels . . . corner seats . . . an attenuated whistle, and that fearful, amateur jerk with which the engine-driver always started. Then the slow passing of the river running under the bridge which led to the golf-links . . . the dark little patch on the road-side which was the opening of the lane that ran up to the

club-house. The links! The club-house! No wonder Peter and Charles, looking out of the window, were silent. It was up there, on that great green hill-side, that something—something had come to them, and made the rest of their lives seem worth the living. As the silent sleepy cliff slid away behind the train, it seemed almost like an old friend setting out upon a long journey. It left the same sad impression. Even after the change at the junction, that feeling remained, and Charles and Peter sat silently occupied with their own thoughts almost all the way to Waterloo,—magazines and papers lying idle by their sides. One thing only, they knew, would cure this melancholy; the moment when they were alone again with Joan and Emily. They were thinking, perhaps, of the road along which that original madness might have led; thanking the gods that be for the actual outcome. Dangerous folly? Yes—but *'Coelum ipsum petimus stultitia."*

There is many a madness leading to salvation.

Waterloo, the old luggage, the old cab, the old home, the old problems . . . but with it all, a gay new feeling, an incredible lightness of heart, even when the pile of bills and correspondence is picked up from the old chest in the hall.

* * * * *

Emily, four months later, could not pretend, even with the best will in the world, that her son's actual

wedding had been a success. To her mind, it must have seemed "very odd" to the various relations and friends who ought to have been invited, but who were not. Alison had insisted upon putting the whole business through with as great expedition, and as little ceremony, as possible. Even the organist was only allowed to play his instrument once, at the end of the service, and he, the father of nine children, with a sense of sentiment in proportion, was quite personally hurt that no one had thought it worth while to ask for any particular music. So he had played the Wedding March with a touch that was almost truculent. The whole affair, according to Emily's ideas, was over "almost before it had begun." "You might have thought," she said, afterwards, to Joan, "that Harold and Alison were ashamed of it!"

To this Joan could find no answer, for she felt, at least as far as Alison was concerned, that it might very well be the truth.

And, indeed, deep down in herself, the bride's mother was not so sure . . . Alison kneeling there at the altar steps, while the clergyman gave them his address, and somewhere behind the immediate relations the quite audible sniffs of an old servant of the Cutmans', to whom this was a landmark of sentimental orgy standing out, as in red ink, amongst the similar pleasure she was wont to extract from churchyards, on her "evenings out."

Joan tried to remember the address delivered

over her own bridal head, years ago. She could not recall a word of it. Naturally, she had been thinking of other things—the train they were to catch at Paddington; that troublesome veil; the picture of Peter in pyjamas (wondering whether pyjamas would make any difference to Peter!); the insistent idea that she had somehow cut her life in half at this point—and a vague, but very real, sensation of fear. . . . In honesty, that was all that Joan could remember of her own wedding. There were, of course, other kaleidoscopic impressions still remaining. A spinster aunt who kept on saying that something or other was "very wonderful"—and her father looking very hot and seeming strangely relieved. She could not even remember much of what the clergyman had said to her daughter that afternoon. He had, she recalled, made a reference to child-bearing which, outside a church, would certainly have been considered in the worst possible taste. Yes, she was forced to admit, that in a perfectly kind and fatherly way, he had said things over their defenceless heads which might well cause any sensitive pair of lovers to shun the clergy for the rest of their days. Not, of course, that it was the fault of the Reverend James Farquhar, an old friend of her husband's, whom they knew to be a great-hearted old gentleman, with all-embracing sympathies. But his profession pledged him to mediaevalism: and the manners of mediaevalism are apt to look gross in these days. Yes, to a

nature like Alison's the whole affair might well have appeared impertinent. It was quite likely, as Emily had hinted, that she was ashamed of it. Anyway, it was over, and Harold and Alison had gone to Paris for a week. Two days before the ceremony Joan had been surprised to receive a visit from Harold just before the dinner-hour. He had appeared, almost as a conspirator, and seemed unaccountably nervous. Her mind, never quite free from dwelling upon her daughter's defiant story of the evening in the wood, now flew back to it, to the exclusion of everything else. Here was the boy, obviously ashamed of what he wanted to tell her! What else could it be, then, but that. . . . And yet, she reflected quickly, there would be no confession unless such a thing had become necessary, and, in that case, surely the embassy would not come from Harold!

"Look here!" he had suddenly perked out, "I've been making up my mind to tell you something I thought I ought to tell you before our marriage, because . . . well, because afterwards it wouldn't be quite the same thing."

She had nodded encouragingly, pitying the boy's wretchedness.

"Alison told me," he had continued, "what she had said to you about . . . er . . . about the wood. I . . . I couldn't help thinking that there might be some mistake . . . in your mind, Mrs. Margett, I mean. . . . So I just want to give you my word that—that nothing happened in the wood

at all!" After which, before she could say anything, he had burst out, loyally. "Though I think it was wonderful, splendid of her!"

Joan had risen then and taken his hand.

"Thank you very much," she had answered simply. "If anything could have made me better pleased that you were going to become Alison's closest friend, it would be this."

"What? That nothing happened in the wood?"

"No," she replied. "Just that you thought it right to come and comfort the imaginary fears of an old lady!"

She forgave herself the "imaginary"; after all, why should she give herself away? And so that incident in the bolshevism of Alison was closed. For Joan, even had she ever wished to, was now precluded from speaking of it, out of loyalty to Harold.

And now they were married, and very certain of themselves, and there was a house being taken in Pembroke Road over which Charles Cutman was being allowed to fuss, as regarded the terms of the lease, and Emily, as regarded the drains, an arrangement which, as Joan thought privately, had probably been engineered by the practical Alison, with the deliberate idea that "it would keep Harold's people happy." Moreover, it did.

The worst of these level-headed, unromantic folk is that they are so often right.

Alison, going through an efficient honeymoon in Paris, regarded the occupation of her parents-in-

law as a stroke of policy on her part, calculated to keep them out of mischief. She was apt, like many modern girls, to treat children as if they were grown-up, and elders as if they were children. In Paris, the real strength of Alison's personality was especially in evidence. Harold, whose French was poor, was embarrassed at his disabilities. Alison, who knew no French at all, forced Frenchmen who had no English to understand that language. A triumph of sheer brutality.

On the second day of the honeymoon, Alison walked into Harold's dressing-room and told him that there was something which they ought to discuss immediately. Harold, in his dressing-gown, was still moved by the thrill of a council-of-war with a woman, also in a dressing-gown. He had, in his nature, a full share of that respect for the idea of woman which it is now the fashion to date as a foible of the middle of the last century. It seemed still to Harold a great compliment that a woman should come so near to him. . . .

The nature of Alison's problem stunned him, at first. Foolishly, as he instantly admitted to himself, it seemed for a moment to disperse that desirable abyss of respect which lay between them.

"I think we ought to decide, Harold, dear," she said calmly, "whether we want to have a child or not. It seems to me rather degrading to have a child by mistake. Especially to the child."

He nodded. In a way, he supposed it was. It was certainly an arguable point of view. On the

other hand, deliberation seemed to make the baby, in a kind of way, machine-made. . . . Surely there was something to be said for the divine accident. And, rightly or wrongly, it was a discussion which seemed rather wretched.

Alison went into ways and means and the number of servants who would be required in the house in Pembroke Road, if a nursery was to be waited upon. Harold agreed with her that it could just be done. But he could not help feeling that they had missed the glorious thrill of discovering, after the event, that it could just be done.

"And, of course," said Alison, "I should like a child. Would you?"

"Of course," answered Harold. There was something in his wife's tone which made the potential baby appear part of the routine of an efficient married woman. The wood seemed a great distance away. Had it simply been what Peter Margett would have called propaganda? A proclamation of independence, a throwing down of the gauntlet on behalf of modernity? "No, no," he told himself; "there had been passion in those kisses." There was passion somewhere, hidden beneath the fearful efficiency of the girl who sat opposite to him, in her dressing-gown. His wife. His wife! The word whirled him away from misgiving. He had only been used to it for two days: he kissed her, radiantly.

Ten weeks later, Alison told Joan that she was likely to become a mother.

CHAPTER XIX.

Joan kissed her, and smiled. She was glad that Alison was going to have a baby, frankly regarding its advent as a possible medicine for her daughter's disease.

Emily, on the other hand, hugged her daughter-in-law, cried a little, and started stitching and embroidering, like a sweated seamstress. The baby, as it happened, gave more joy to her than he was destined to give to anyone, for, on a raw October morning, after several hours of queer noises, which just reached Harold as he paced up and down the room below (little snatches of mad song, dying away into a strange helpless drone, and erratic footsteps of people who might be doing anything), there came a long silence. Harold stopped walking up and down and stood at the door. He hesitated to go out of the room. He had so often, during the night, been asked quite kindly to remain inside. He heard steps coming down the stairs, and a murmur which he could not catch. Then Joan's voice, on a low note.

"Ah."

After which the cool, balanced tone of the nurse.

"I think you had better tell her."

"Is she . . . ?"

"Oh, yes . . . just coming round. Here is Doctor Vardon."

Harold heard the Doctor's step on the stairs. Then another murmur. And more steps, going up. He came out of the room at that, and saw the doctor and the nurse, talking in the hall. Joan had evidently gone up to the bedroom. As he came forward, the doctor hurried to meet him. The nurse seemed to vanish, as if by magic.

The older man took his arm and drew him back into the study.

"I'm sorry," he said. "Your boy was born dead. I was afraid that might happen, from certain symptoms last night; but there was no point in alarming you . . . when there was a chance that it might be needless. Your wife is perfectly all right. She'll be as fit as a fiddle in three weeks." He squeezed Harold's hand sympathetically. "I hate bringing news like this," he said, then picked up his bag. "You would rather be alone, of course."

Harold pulled himself together.

"Rotten luck!" he said, huskily. "You'll have something before you go, Doctor? A whiskey-and-soda?"

"Thanks, no. Better have one yourself. And don't forget to eat a good breakfast."

He was gone. A decent old chap. Harold gazed up the stairs towards Alison's room. A maid, who had heard the closing of the front door, put

her head timidly round the top of the basement stairs.

"Excuse me, sir," she stammered. "Is it a girl or a boy?"

"Hush," answered Harold, without quite knowing why, and added, "he is dead."

The mere fact that the baby could no longer be referred to as "it" seemed to make his grief more poignant for the son he had never seen. At least the child had now become 'someone'. He turned back towards the study, his hands clasped behind his back.

The maid, feeling that the situation was beyond her scanty vocabulary, disappeared. He sank into his armchair. Poor Alison! . . . poor girl. All those rotten months, and then this!

He stole quietly up the stairs, pausing for a moment outside Alison's room. There was no sound. He went on, and found himself upon the landing of the little room which had been prepared as a nursery. Some perverse idea of feeding his distress made him open the door and go in. There, in the corner, was the bassinette, with those silly ribbons which his mother had so loved to stitch onto the muslin curtains: and inside, the coverlet—with a 'C' embroidered upon it by Joan. He walked across to it. Somehow that 'C' made the whole thing real to him, over again. He lifted the coverlet and stood suddenly still, shocked. There was something beneath it. What he had thought were the blankets, were not.

So that was where they had laid his boy.

A level, kindly voice, from the doorway, brought him back to himself.

"Now, Mr. Cutman, it won't help you at all to be up here."

He turned and saw the nurse standing at the foot of the little bed.

"I mayn't see my wife yet," he answered. "I would like to see my boy."

"You can see Mrs. Cutman very soon now. She will make a splendid recovery."

"I would like to see my boy," he said doggedly.

"Very well. And then you will go?"

He nodded. She turned back the coverlet, unloosed a safety pin with deft fingers and laid back a flannel covering. Then she crossed to the window and turned her back upon Harold. He looked down upon a little red, withered old man. It seemed miraculous that so small a thing should be so perfect. His son. He picked up one of the little hands and kissed it. "Charlie," he murmured, and then let it fall and drew himself up.

"*Ave atque vale,* little chap," he said, and turned away. That was all the christening and all the burial-service his boy would ever need. He heard the nurse behind him, putting things in order.

"Thank you, Nurse," he said, over his shoulder.

"Go down and have some breakfast, Mr. Cutman," she answered.

Well, she was right. It was weak and foolish to

make oneself unnecessarily ill; unable to deal with things. Alison would hate that. . .

He went slowly down to the dining-room.

* * * * *

Alison, drifting slowly out of the fog of unconsciousness, found her mother by her side.

"Is it all over?" she asked in a thin whisper.

"Yes. All over, dear."

"Boy?"

"Yes."

Alison's eyes never left her mother's face.

"Well," she said, all of a sudden. "Tell me!"

"He was born dead, dear girl."

There was a long silence. Alison lay quite still, dry-eyed. When she spoke, her words came as a shock to Joan.

"Whose fault was it?" she asked.

"Fault? Why, no one's fault."

"Mine, then," answered her daughter. Whereat she turned her face to the wall, her left hand lying limp in her mother's.

For some minutes Joan sat there silently, wondering at the way in which Alison had taken the news. Could it be that even this was to be estimated by the test of efficiency, like everything else? She put the idea from her, telling herself that, under such a shock, stranger things might have been expected.

Suddenly Alison spoke again, without turning.

"I'd like to see Harold," she said.

Joan looked a question to the nurse, who had just come in. She nodded and Joan slipped out of the room.

When Harold came in, his only positive emotion was a desire to be of some use to his wife. He knew, like an actor in some unsuitable part, that the situation was outside the measure of his experience. Still, like the actor, he trusted blindly to instinct. Whatever he must do—he believed he had the capacity for "getting it over."

The white mask appearing over the bed-clothes was horribly unlike Alison.

He was aware of a moment of cowardly indecision, in the doorway; aware, two seconds later, of a burning longing that this indecision should have passed, unnoticed.

Then a voice in his ear said, "Five minutes, Mr. Cutman," and a kind of sensation in white and butcher-blue seemed to pass him by. It was a sensation which he remembered. But where? He recalled it suddenly. It was at the obsequies of his son.

There seemed nothing personal about this woman. She was simply an impression in blue-and-white. Yet she had forced herself indelibly upon the canvas of his life. Now, he heard her footsteps, going upstairs.

Evidently his son still demanded service, though

his actual life could be measured in minutes. Yet the woman demanded service too: and he was ashamed that so much of him was still upstairs—in the nursery. When he approached the bed, he felt, perhaps for the first time in his life, that sense of inevitable, but inexcusable, brutality which, in his relationship with women, comes to every sensitive man. Yet, even as he looked at her, he realised, in part, that he was deceiving himself: that martyrdom, in some form or other, was a necessity for a woman. Still, sentiment triumphed. He felt a cad.

He took her hand and winced to find it so cold. And then, again, his brain took charge, and he remembered that there was something colder upstairs, in the bassinette; and, as he remembered, he fought desperately against the idea that, in himself also, there was something which had turned icy-cold, in sympathy.

He heard Alison's voice.

"Funny," she whispered. "Little boy. Little woolen suits. Lots of self-will, I expect! First little spanks! Eton collars—school . . . Oxford . . . women, and the woman we'd be allowed to know! Their children, and our efforts not to interfere!" She laughed suddenly, queerly.

"I'm a little light-headed, Harold," she said.

He patted her hand, soothingly. Yet her half-hysterical sentences seemed to him like a précis of everything for which he had hoped from this night's agony.

"Rotten luck, darling," he answered. "But . . . we love each other all right; that's all that really matters."

She sighed.

"Don't, Harold," she said. "That's what your father would have said to my mother."

For a moment he rebelled. What he had said was commonplace, and he knew it. But there is a time for commonplace, and either he must have said something of the kind, or nothing at all. Yet he could not fight against her weakness: he could not assert himself in the face of her pain. He simply smiled; cursing himself for entertaining even a moment's irritation, at such a time. His wife's eyes were closed, but she was speaking again: speaking vaguely, in queer little jerks. . . .

"Lived seven minutes, they say . . . my fault, I expect . . . I must ask the doctor. No good getting sentimental or tragic about it. We must stick to our creed . . . the only one. I don't want to see the body!"

Harold made no answer. For some seconds he sat still, wondering vaguely why his wife's last few words had sounded like some horribly offensive discord, played in his ear. Then he realised, all of a sudden, that she was asleep. The impression in blue-and-white was somewhere in the room again. He rose.

"Asleep, I think," he murmured.

"Yes, she's dozing," answered the nurse, and, for

some reason or other, he found her at his elbow, in the doorway.

"You musn't mind," she whispered, "anything your wife may have said, Mr. Cutman. She's had quite a lot of chloroform, you know."

"Eh? Oh, no, of course not! Not that she . . . but, thanks. Of course not!" And so he escaped.

Splendid nurse, that! Anticipated everything. Always trying to be kind, too! Not that she understood, of course, but still, she *wanted* to be kind!

Anyway, it meant that Alison would be looked after.

In the evening, Harold paid another visit to the bedroom. The nurse opened the door to him, and smiled.

"I wouldn't come in, Mr. Cutman," she said. "She is fast asleep and quite comfortable. Take my advice, and get a good night's rest yourself."

He went to his room and started to undress.

As he was getting into bed, he found himself repeating over and over again, "You musn't mind . . . anything she may have said . . ."

"Chloroform," he told himself, and suddenly became terrified at the value which he was beginning to set upon this word.

CHAPTER XX.

He got over the startling shock of those ten minutes at the bedside, of course. In twenty-four hours that word "chloroform" had definitely obscured the horror of the words, as it did physical pain, and, in a fortnight, as Alison grew stronger every day, and as the relationship between the two became automatically normal again, even his son began to appear simply as a possibility which had not eventuated. No more actually real than a brief which had been expected, but which, at the last moment, had been given to someone else. So Charles Cutman, junior, having tasted this life for seven minutes of tortured breath, might be supposed to have left not the ghost of a footprint where he had passed.

Harold and Alison resumed their normal, uneventfully happy existence. There were no more children: that particular angle of married life had been bungled, and it was obviously better to stick to the things which you knew you could do well.

And there were many things which Alison could do well. She could keep her household and herself at that particular pitch of well-being which was expected of her particular niche in Society. She could

deal with the vagaries of difficult servants. She could see that her husband was comfortable, that his outward life experienced no knocks or jars, other than those he might, or might not, receive in his chambers at the Inner Temple. So all was well—just as well as the dining-room clock which was wound up every Friday night, and ticked comfortably along for the next seven days.

Indeed, the clock ticked away the seconds and the minutes and the hours and even the years, and Harold Cutman and Alison never stopped to wonder whether they had really achieved happiness or not. The meals were regular and there were no quarrels; and the Church and the Law, at any rate, demand nó higher standard from marriage than this.

Eight years after the wedding, Charles Cutman died. He came back, on a wet evening, from his chambers, and, in spite of Emily's entreaties, was too lazy to take off his boots. In the semi-delirium which supervened towards the end of his pneumonia, he kept on repeating that the last eight years of his life had been the most wonderful he had ever known. When he was actually within a few moments of death, Emily was holding his hand.

"Going now," he gasped, all of a sudden, and she felt his fingers grip hers, as they had when he was a young man. Then he closed his eyes and fought horribly for ten seconds more of breath.

"Young . . . always silly . . . He won . . . . we were . . . Different ways now," he

coughed. "Tell them . . . laburnum tree right . . . . dead right!"

Then his whole body shivered like a kicked jelly-fish. She thought it was the end, but, for no apparent reason, his voice became suddenly normal and clear.

"Emily," he said, "you are wonderful . . . you have always been wonderful. I thank God for you."

She kissed his foul damp forehead passionately; kissed his dry lips—trying, animal-like, to suck back some moisture into them from her own. His hand clawed wildly into the air. She found it, realising in a flash that this was going to be the last time his fingers would close round hers. They clung to her hand like red-hot talons. Then, slowly, they seemed to grow cold. She looked at his face on the pillow, thinking that he had gone. But, suddenly, with an unnatural jerk, his head came up and he smiled happily into her eyes; his parched lips twisted and writhed.

She put her face close to his, for she knew he had something else to say before he left her.

"Golden girl," he whispered, and seemed to have exhausted his strength. Then, quickly, all in a breath, he finished. "See you later!" he said loudly, and fell back. The bedclothes quivered and then sagged. There was a queer metallic snap from the face on the pillow. The jaw dropped, and Charles Cutman's face became a hideous mask. But "golden

girl" was the name he had called her under the laburnum-tree—as it seemed, millions of years ago. And it is things like that which make Death ridiculous.

Later, at least, it was the personal memory of those last quick confidences, the personal certainty of those few moments of absolute happiness, that made the black coat of Harold and the black Paris model of Alison seem just a little absurd, just a little unnecessary, even to the conventional Emily.

Somehow, after the passage of several months, even, she did not feel that she could give the young people that last message. She knew, well enough, all that was meant by the "laburnum tree," but she knew also that the gift of words, the right words to impart such priceless knowledge to a couple of heretics was not hers. In the end, after hours of torment, thinking herself disloyal to her dead husband, she never told them at all.

And she was right; they would have been kind and sympathetic, but nothing more.

Thus, Charles Cutman's body rotted and replenished the earth, in the little Sussex churchyard, where the accident of his great-grandfather's rectorship had ordained that all the Cutmans should be buried. But Charles Cutman's soul continued to keep alive, in the heart of an old woman, an unquenchable fire of enthusiasm for life and love and suffering, up to the day when she, too, with great content, surrendered, without question, her fat old

body and her garrulous old mind, and slid away, care-free, into whatever might lie behind the gentle black curtain which descended upon her last few moments.

As for Harold and Alison, the years slipped comfortably over their heads; the disappearance of a cook or the discovery of a housemaid's dishonesty, being the only kind of storm which ruffled the placidity of their existence. Harold's practice grew bigger, and they moved from Pembroke Road to a pretty little house in Knightsbridge. Alison, even after twenty years, did not appear to have changed much. At one period she had threatened to grow stout, but she immediately discovered the right exercise to counteract this tendency and efficiently conquered it. Her father had then retired and, finding on his retirement that he could get no happiness in the surroundings in which he had been so accustomed to energise, suddenly left England with Joan and settled in Italy.

Joan acquiesced in this retirement, though, in private, she regarded it as a mute acknowledgment of the end of her personal existence. There was nothing to prevent her going, and the realisation of this saddened her. In the old struggling days, how thrilling such a journey would have been, what pictures every trivial foreign incident would have called up to her vivid, but long-suppressed, imagination. To-day she regarded the prospect with a tinge of bitterness; could not help wondering what she had

actually achieved, now that she was within measurable distance of Death. Alison, certainly, no longer needed her. Indeed, looking back through the years, even to nursery days, the old lady began to doubt whether Alison had ever needed her—whether indeed Alison had ever needed anyone—even her husband. And, to Joan, it semed a very tragic business, a terrible waste to fake the semblance of a great friendship, when there was no actual need of that friendship at all. She puzzled over it, even tormented herself over it. . . . Thus had Emily, whose mere intelligence was so much less acute than Joan's, had the advantage of her all the time—during those pregnant days at Whyticombe and after the dull consummation of Harold's marriage. Emily realised no tragedy or comedy, except in those situations which had been tacitly and conventionally labelled as such. She regarded the dead child as a tragedy, Harold's story of an illiterate plumber, at work on the Pembroke Road kitchen range, as a comedy. Such things were cut-and-dried, in her mind. When Alison refused to grieve over the non-existence of their son, she was at first puzzled. Then her conventional mind and her conventional training came to her rescue, and she persuaded herself, quite easily, that Alison's nature was "reserved," that the poor, cheated mother could not bring herself to speak of sorrows so intimate. Emily had even respected her daughter-in-law for this imaginary reticence. She had died, comforted

in the idea that her son had a wife whose nature was so "deep." "Deep" and "lasting" were words she had used since girlhood synonymously, and without the slightest notion of their meaning or actual efficacy in the scheme of things. But Joan was different. Hers was the weakness of extreme intelligence. She believed in the maxims of her youth, in all the emotions which she and Emily, as girls, had been taught to consider as "deep and lasting." She believed in sentiment, in "family life," in "faithfulness" (quite apart from whether that faithfulness was the outcome of genuine emotion or the result of continuous human strain)—she believed in all these things, but, since her brain would insist upon working in larger circles, she could not completely persuade herself that there might not be other schemes of perfectly legitimate happiness; that fashions in love—as in clothes—might not be capable of supersession. With her right hand she clung to the canons she knew; with her left she tried feebly to push away the disturbing possibilities which her tyrant of a brain was for ever suggesting. Emily's left hand had always been a faint, admiring shadow of her right, and so Emily had, on the whole, been a happier woman than Joan.

When Alison's mother came to say goodbye, before starting for Italy, her daughter kissed her heartily, and congratulated her. "It's a splendid thing for you, Mother," she said. "You always needed colour and warmth—you're out of place here." (As if Joan did not know it!) "In Italy,

even the houses have frescoes painted on the outside. You'll adore Italy!"

"Well," answered Joan, slowly, in the curious meditative tones she always used, "perhaps I shall."

She was not, really, thinking about Italy at all: she was only wondering in her acute, vivid way, why it was that a grown-up child should be so pleased at the removal of its mother: the removal, that is to say, in mere mileage. As she looked at Alison, still telling her of the wonders of Italy, Joan felt, suddenly, and with a definite sense of surprise even in the moment that it was better that the baby had never lived. As Alison smiled into her mother's eyes, without the slightest sense of what lay behind the surface of them, Joan actually wondered whether it might—possibly—have been better if her own daughter had never lived. She returned home to her packing, with a sense that the visit had been as ridiculous as a conventional call. She might just as well have left a card upon Alison.

Well, perhaps none of it mattered. Perhaps the standards of her own youth were really outworn. Perhaps she and Peter and their like had become tiresome to the young. And even so, had they the right to complain? Certainly not. Their lives were behind them.

In due course Alison herself would be an old woman. She too would become, as it were, one of the books which are never taken down from the shelf: works which made a sensation in their day,

but which became tedious, and even infantile, to a new generation, pregnant, of course, with greater possibilities than any litter to which the world had ever given birth before.

How would Alison take it, when the dust began to settle upon her? Joan shook her head over her open trunk, and told herself that it was very wicked of her to want to smile. Yet, for all that, she smiled.

In Italy she discovered that Alison had been right. "You always needed colour . . . you're out of place here!"

It was a distinct effort to realise that Alison was right. Joan had to arrive at it by a process of belittlement: by telling herself that, after all, it was unlikely that even Alison could invariably be wrong.

Italy gave her, in the last few years of her life, everything which, by their absence, had caused the writing of her "unmarketable" poems so long as her soul was not too tired to protest against its boundaries. Here, among a strange people, among unaccustomed scenes, with uninherited laws and customs, there seemed to be no real boundaries, after all. Peter himself became the only definite standard by which to measure her life. Inversely, the editor too found his horizon narrowing gently to a circle just large enough to contain his wife and himself.

It was indeed a genuine inspiration which had sent Peter and his wife abroad, in their old age.

If they had any sense of defeat, it was not in their

own lives. The years slipped behind them and they no longer bothered whether their ideas were right or wrong. They only knew that, in their own case, those ideas had "worked" satisfactorily. They were happy and they were not afraid of death: and, as the old man put it jocularly to the old lady, sitting in their little cliff-garden, overlooking the Mediterranean, "You can't say fairer than that."

Alison's letters came regularly, documents so matter-of-fact that they almost read like statistics.

"Harold bought a new winter overcoat yesterday. Thirteen guineas. Apparently it's a reasonable price for a decent coat. But Harold's has a belt, and only one button. I'm not sure I care for it."

That kind of letter.

One day, Joan, reading to her husband the latest news from their daughter, came upon this passage:

"Do you remember Dr. Weare? He used to come to Whyticombe when we were kids."

"Ah," interjected the old man, "that shows you how difficult it is to understand children! Do we remember Owen Weare! Well, well—what about the dear old chap?"

Joan paused for a moment, then read on:

"He died suddenly the other day, from heart-failure. Apparently, he always had a bad heart."

She stopped again, as if that last sentence meant more than it said.

"Poor old Owen!" said Peter. "He was a good sort—always."

Joan answered nothing. She was thinking of Loveday, released at last, years and years too late. Like a prisoner serving a life-sentence, whose good conduct has saved for him a few pitiful months, and who shuffles out of the prison gates into a blinding, useless freedom.

And yet, thought Joan, perhaps this tragedy, like so many, came about from lack of courage.

Loveday should have left him.

"Poor old Owen!" murmured Peter, half asleep in the sun. "Always a good sort. But he died quick, it seems . . . that's something."

He slipped further down into his chair and tilted his hat over his eyes.

"Poor Mrs. Weare," he said sleepily. "You ought to write her a letter."

"Yes," answered Joan, and said no more. In a few moments she noticed that Peter was asleep, and she slipped indoors. The time was ripe and good—for she did not want Peter to see that letter.

CHAPTER XXI.

The Beach Hotel at Whyticombe was under new management, when Alison and Harold visited it again, nearly twenty years after their engagement. The place itself had not changed much: a new villa here, with a bright clean red roof, a new shop there—or an old one with a new name painted over its windows. But the faces, of course, were strange. Not that Harold and Alison experienced any feeling of sadness, as their parents would have done, over this very natural phenomenon. Their lives, at the time when they were last holiday-making at the little town, had hardly begun, whereas Emily and Joan, Charles and Peter had long arrived at that point where all one's surroundings appear permanent. Harold enquired after Ted Willis, and learnt that he had been dead twelve years. The manner of his death was still a romance to folk who were accustomed to a yearly routine of splendid normality.

"Very queer, sir," a young fisherman told Harold. "God took him at his work, as one might say. Thought he'd done enough lobstering and messing about, maybe. But God likes work, sir; He let him get his pots in, and then took him."

"Do you mean he died on his boat?"

The young man nodded.

"Yes, sir. My uncle was one of them that went out and found him. His boat lay out there."

He shot a brown arm out towards Sanscombe.

"He went out in the late afternoon, sir, to take in his pots, and the next morning there was his boat still riding off the rocks. The old fellows got together on the beach an' looked at her. They all knew old Willis was queer, sir, and that's, I expect, why they didn't do anything till the afternoon. Then they put out to see what was up. He was dead an' stiff, stir, when they reached him. Dead many hours, doctor said. But he was a rum bird in life, sir, and he was a rum bird dead, too!"

The fisherman paused, unwilling to waste the dramatic crisis of his story.

"How do you mean?" asked Harold.

"He was dead, but standing, sir! Standing up against the mast, with his icy old arm crooked around it, so he couldn't fall and, eyes open, over the channel. He weren't staring, like the dead, Uncle told us; just looking out like anyone else. Reckon he knew what was coming, sir, and those who found him say he looked as if he knew where he was going to, as well. But there, sir, old chaps like Uncle, as you know, are like to be fanciful."

He drew his hand across his mouth, reflectively.

"Still, old Willis was always queer . . . always."

Harold nodded.

"But he was a good sort. Took me out fishing when I was a boy," he said.

"Aye, sir," nodded the other. "No one could ever say that Willis didn't know all there is about fishing."

He nodded awkwardly and moved down the beach towards his own boat. Harold felt embarrassed for a moment, wondering whether the man had expected a tip. He could not help remembering the ease and grace with which Ted Willis was wont to sweep off his hat and smile, at the end of such an interview. And this was his epitaph! He knew "all there is about fishing"!

As Harold walked back to the hotel he experienced a definite feeling of having lost something. Not the mere physical presence of Ted Willis, for that had never been of importance to him. By his very age, the fisherman had never been anything but a memory to the young man. Yet it seemed now as if an idea, a very definite and desirable idea, had vanished. The sensation was mysterious, and, like his father, Harold always became depressed when he was puzzled.

They had taken a private sitting-room at the Beach Hotel, and, on the very first night, had recognised it, with an effort, as the very room in which the party had taken place upon the day of their engagement. An old-fashioned sofa stood in the window—the window looking out over the sea—and Alison had already complained of its uncomfortable formation.

When Harold came in, he flung himself down upon this sofa and stared out of the window.

Alison, sitting in an armchair, on the other side of the room, looked up quickly, diagnosed the usual affection of the liver, inseparable from the first hours of sea-side holiday, and returned to her work.

Harold sat still, his eyes looking over the channel, but seeing nothing. Curious imaginations, quite foreign to his own nature, seemed suddenly to take hold of him. His mind ran, as it appeared, uncontrolled, over his own career. His success at the bar—mediocre, sufficient. His success in society—accepted as an uninterestingly respectable individual. What was left? The greatest, most ambitious field of all. His success in his own home. Still that terrible word "mediocre" insisted. The hiss of Alison's needle, in and out of the brim of a hat which she was re-decorating, seemed to make it even more redundant. He moved uneasily upon the sofa, with an ever-growing and ever-resisted sensation that something outside himself was assailing his soul. It was as if he was actually losing ground in some terrific battle, for the absurd reason that he had never realised that it was a battle at all.

Alison's needle ticked on like a clock.

"Damn," he said, without knowing that he had spoken.

She looked up.

"What's the matter, Harold?"

"Nothing," he answered. "Did I speak?" Then he realised the necessity of some sort of explanation.

"Do you remember old Willis?" he went on.

"Vaguely," answered Alison. "You mean the fisherman?"

Harold nodded. It was so like her to remember what he did rather than what he was.

"I've been hearing how he died," he said, as if that might explain the sudden unconscious oath.

"He was an old man," returned Alison, in a tone which showed that she had little interest in her subject.

"Oh, yes," answered Harold; "he was an old man."

He himself could not pretend to any real emotion over the death of Ted Willis. He had simply used the memory of the man as an explanation of his own inexplicable emotions.

Alison's needle started to click rhythmically, once more. The light just beginning to fade, the sea turned a deeper grey. The window rattled, a kind of irritable mutter, before the vanguard of a breeze. The man on the sofa moved sharply, unnaturally. Something which he could not describe even to himself was attacking him—as if a horde of monstrous gnats buzzed about his brain. He jumped suddenly to his feet: so suddenly that Alison dropped her work into her lap and stared.

"It's odd," he said. "I've a feeling that something once happened in this room—something rather marvelous: do you believe in suggestion?"

Alison picked up her hat.

"I daresay," she said, "that different things react

on different minds. No doubt one's surroundings have some physical effect upon one. It's a question for the doctors. If you mean anything else—well, no. That kind of nonsense doesn't lead anywhere."

He felt suddenly furious with the quiet conceit which was carrying Alison so serenely through life: which, indeed, had carried him, up to this point.

"My God," he heard himself saying, "don't we believe in anything?"

Alison rose.

"What do you mean?" she asked.

He shrugged his shoulders and, turning, stood looking out of the window again. He knew that he could not explain.

"The wood," he muttered. "Oh, we were fine in the wood! We were going to defy the world with our brand-new theories, weren't we? We were so jolly kind to go to church and have a wedding-breakfast for the sake of our relations and their silly conventions! We, who knew so much better! Well, the wood made a fool of me, too! I thought it was all real!"

Alison's cold voice cut in.

"Do you mean that you think I deceived you that night?"

"No; I don't mean that. I know that you meant it—our creed of commonsense and all that. We both meant it. Only . . ."

"Only what?"

He turned round.

"Well," he said slowly, "the fact remains that we didn't defy convention in the wood, after all."

She stared at him.

"I would have given myself to you, then," she said.

"Perhaps, perhaps," he answered, and shivered for no particular reason. "Only," he added, "it didn't happen, because——"

She waited deliberately for him.

"Because we aren't that kind of people," he went on in a rush. "Because we aren't big enough or small enough, whichever it is, to be happy except according to the rules. And, because we thought we were so mighty superior, we chucked away all the things that make it possible to live by rules."

"We were to be partners," said Alison slowly.

"It is impossible!" he cried.

"Do you mean you have been faking it all these years?"

"No. Finding it out."

"Finding what out? That you don't care for me?"

"That to be partners, there must be something to . . . to cling to." The man felt that he could never tell her what he meant. It seemed impossible to put it into words. For a moment he wished he had said nothing, though he knew that the impulse to speak had come from outside, had been stronger than him.

"We were to be masters of our lives," she was saying. "Why should we accept blindly second-hand emotions?"

"There are things you must accept blindly . . . Life itself you can't choose. Love . . ."

He stopped abruptly, with a sense that it was useless to oppose his red-hot mood to Alison's cold reasonable logic.

"There's just one thing," he said. "We agreed—that, if ever either of us felt that the partnership was no longer real, we would not try to conceal it. If you feel you no longer care for me, Harold, for heaven's sake, do me the justice of telling me."

"If I didn't care for you, Alison," he returned, in a low voice, "why should I have said a single word of all this?"

And for all his words, he did not know why he had said what he had. She kissed him on the forehead.

"I must change for dinner," she said. "Are you going to?"

"Oh, yes," he answered dully, and then, when she was at the door, "Alison, do you never remember being afraid of the dark?"

"Never," she returned. "Don't be long, dear."

She went out, and the door closed behind her.

As he sank back upon the ugly sofa in the window, the closed door appeared to his brain as a caricature of Alison herself. He put up a last desperate fight against the convictions that crowded upon him like

an army in close order. He told himself that he was tired, morbid—ill. . . .

But a force infinitely stronger than his own counter-attack beat him back. Wildly, without reason, he felt that, if only he could get out of that room, he would be free of its compulsion. He staggered to his feet, and found himself upon his knees.

It was a real prayer he uttered, the first for many years—perhaps all the more genuine for that.

"Curse cleverness," he said, "curse wisdom—I want to be happy, I want Alison to be happy, I want a child who is happy—I want to be the chap that makes them happy!"

A soft voice seemed to whisper in his ear, "Pooh! The emotions of the stone-age . . . of the animals, perhaps!"

"Who cares?"

"Aren't you a man? With a Public School and an Oxford career behind you?"

"Miles behind me. I'm grown up."

"Grown up? And only gone back to a sense of possession and a desire to protect your belongings?"

"Who cares? I've heard all that before . . . even at Oxford. God! How many names has Love been called!"

"Love?" The soft voice seemed to purr derisively. "What has it achieved? To what ambition has it been anything but a handicap?"

"To all, perhaps, except itself."

"What! Is a simple home an ambition? Remember, it's a big word."

Suddenly Harold heard his own voice, curiously loud, as if answering someone whom he knew to be out of hearing.

"I know it is a big word, and I swear it is the biggest thing!"

He stood up, in the growing darkness, staring into the luminous blue of the window. At his back the shabby, ugly room lay in deep, kind shadows.

"Klondyke! Stake out your claim quick and hang on to it!"

Harold started at the reality of the voice. He turned quickly and found himself with his hand on the door. Then, in the darkness, he heard a soft rustle, like the swish of silk, at his feet. Instinctively, he swung open the door, with that sense of embarrassment which a man feels when he has been on the point of preceding a lady.

"I'm sorry," he said, involuntarily, and stood there, holding the door open.

There was no sound. No one passed out into the dimly-lighted passage.

But someone came in.

Standing there, semi-conscious, by reason of the intoxication of his own mental revolution, Harold was not aware of the entrance of what, to him, appeared as the third person.

He came to earth, as it were, when he saw that someone—someone with shaking fingers—was lighting the gas at the side of the mantelpiece. The yellow flame leapt up with an explosive little hiss, and, catching the draught from the window, threw

pale shadows jumping all over the room, like an old sick clown going through his capers.

Beneath the fluttering jet Harold saw a short black figure, something like a low peg on which someone had hung innumerable shawls. Even when this object turned round, he could see only that it possessed a face. The features caught no illumination from the capricious light above them. But he felt, suddenly, that the thing was looking at him, and he realised that his own face must be in the full light.

"Dear! dear!" A quavering voice, curiously low, came to him. "It *is* Harold!" The shapeless black shadow produced a cracked, horrible laugh.

"And why no light?" it went on. "Why no light? To be afraid of the light! Oh, dear! That's the most fearful confession of all. Even I, even I . . . was only afraid of the dark!"

He saw her now more plainly, an old woman, with a crumpled yellow face, from which, like two jewels, bewildered at the inadequacy of their setting, stared a pair of flashing aquamarines.

Old Mrs. Weare!

So she was still labelled in the files of Harold's mind, though he could no longer call himself the "new" generation.

Mrs. Weare.

And, he remembered, the cheery old doctor's wife had been said, for a long time, to have become a little "queer." Not that she had gone "out of her

mind"—that misfortune had a tinge of disgrace about it in the circles in which Harold's life had been thrown—and one was expected to call people eccentric, under their rules, though the utmost limits, even of Bohemia, had long since been overstepped. Besides, what excuse had Loveday Weare for such a regrettable and anti-social fate to overtake her? The death of Owen Weare, that incomparable husband, might have caused a grief so deep that it amounted to mania; but the eccentricities of Loveday had developed months, even years before the doctor had settled his account.

"Yes," he heard her say, "even I was only afraid of the dark. In the dark, you see, there is no one at all, except yourself . . . and perhaps another. That is terrifying, quite terrifying!"

And for no reason at all, as it appeared to him, the old woman laughed again.

Harold shut the door softly.

"I had no idea you were at Whyticombe," he said. "I came tonight."

With an instinct of kindness, he moved across and, taking her arm, guided her to one of the uncompromising armchairs that flanked the fire, as if truculently upholding a hard-dying convention.

"It must be hard for you," he said, "to come here . . . now."

Her eyes blinked at him from the chair, and he saw her thin lips twist into a smile which was like the ghost of some emotion which had once been very

much alive. Somehow the impression it gave him was an impression of revenge.

He shivered and, for want of a better gesture, anæmic embers of the fire.

He felt suddenly her cold hand upon his.

"I've booked the same bedroom," she was saying. "I've been up there. Nothing changed. The same bed—same chair by the side of the bed!" She chuckled again.

Harold licked his dry lips.

"It's silly of you, Mrs. Weare. You'll only get more unhappy this way."

Again the enigmatical, horrible chuckle. The cold, claw-like fingers tapped upon his hand.

"Before I go to bed," she went on, "I'm going downstairs into the hall. Then I'm coming up the stairs to bed . . . all by myself! all by myself!"

He caught a strange note of triumph in her voice. Certainly poor Mrs. Weare was quite mad.

"And then," she said, "I shall open my bedroom door and I shall undress—and I shall lay all my clothes on that chair by the bed. You've no idea what that will mean to me! There was a reason before why I couldn't, you see! And after that I shall get into bed and turn out the light and . . ." her voice dropped to a whisper, "I shall lie right across that big bed from corner to corner! . . . right across from corner to corner!"

He caught a light of pure happiness in her two

great aquamarine eyes. Apparently she saw that he was bewildered—for she sat back suddenly in the chair with a little contented sigh.

"It was worth while coming," she murmured, "just for that journey up to bed." Then she paused, and in a stronger voice, a voice which appeared to Harold surprisingly sane, she said:

"But that is not the only thing I came to Whyticombe for," and she got up from the chair and stood beside him.

He said nothing. Her words had not meant anything to him. The description of the bed, and of the chair by its side, were meaningless, merely terrifying in their suggestion of some insane purpose. It was as if an idiot talked vaguely of things which, in the mouth of a sane person, would hint of unmentionable horrors.

But he felt suddenly that he could no longer stand there in silence.

"We . . . we must dine together, of course," he said.

"I think not," she answered, and he watched, with a wild aversion, her yellow cheeks creasing up again into a dreadful smile.

"No, no," she went on. "You and Alison must dine alone. As far as Romance is concerned I am a leper. Whenever I meet young people I feel I ought to be ringing a leper's bell!"

She seemed to notice his embarrassment for the first time.

"No, no," she repeated; "you do not understand; not yet!"

The door opened behind them, and Harold heard Alison's voice.

"They have rung the gong for dinner; you'll not have time to change now." She broke off sharply, catching sight of the black shadow which stood beside her husband.

The old woman sighed softly—almost as if she was taking a quick breath before making some big physical effort. Then, once more, she gave her curious little chuckle.

"Oh, yes, Alison," she said; "there is plenty of time to change—even now."

"It is Mrs. Weare," Harold put in, quickly. "She has just come down from town." He made a quick, silencing gesture to Alison, as if to tell her that this was not an ordinary visit, that it was no place for an ordinary greeting. Alison, surprised by his warning, bit off the conventional words which were upon her tongue.

"I want you to sit down for a few minutes—a very few minutes." She found Loveday Weare's arm in hers, pushing her gently towards the armchair. She allowed herself to be guided to it, without a word. The old lady stood between her and Harold, and seemed, mysteriously, to dominate them both by some force coming from her shrunken, shapeless figure.

"In a way," she said, "Butler was right. It is a

crime to be diseased. It is wicked not to be happy —eh?" The monosyllabic query came suddenly, like an unexpected rifle-shot from a quiet wood. But evidently the old woman expected no answer, for she went on almost without a pause.

"You two have been to visit me sometimes. Twice a year, wasn't it? Yes, I think so. Just before Christmas and somewhere about June, eh? It wasn't kindness—it was because you felt it was your duty, and you would have felt uncomfortable if you had left it undone. Your duty, because I was alone!" She chuckled again, a real, unmistakably merry little laugh. "Ah," she said, "because I was alone—so pitiably alone! eh? You're puzzled, but you'll soon know what it is I find so funny about that. Yet I liked to see you, because I studied you. Yes, I used to dissect you both when you came and sat in my little drawing-room and wondered how long it would be before you could decently go."

"That is quite true," said Alison suddenly, and the old lady nodded smilingly.

"Of course, dear, of course. And you hated my stuffy old-fashioned drawing-room—you even hated looking at the gilt clock under the glass case. I know!"

She leant forward over Alison, intently.

"So strong you are!" she said in a low voice. "So honest with yourself, eh? I was a strong nature, too. If I had been born when you were born, and encountered what I did encounter, my strength might

have led me—ah, where? But it's not your problem —it's not your problem, my dear; that's why it is so wicked to be unhappy."

"We are not unhappy, Mrs. Weare."

Loveday nodded at her comprehendingly.

"Yes. Perhaps you are right. There has never been anything definite about you at all. Maybe you are not even capable of being unhappy. Poor girl! Poor man!"

"Mrs. Weare!" Harold broke in sharply, indignantly, but the old lady stopped him with a gesture.

"I know," she said. "I know! It is impertinent, is it not? I know that I must explain why I am here, why I talk like this to you, why I am what I am. But when I tell you, I want you to remember that I was strong too—as strong as Alison herself."

"I believe in strength," said Alison. "It is the thing that matters most of all."

"You fool!" snapped the old woman suddenly. "You've never had to use what you call your strength. That's why it has turned into your weakness—your terrible weakness! Listen to me!"

She told them quickly, bitingly, the story she had once told to Alison's mother; only she went further back and told them of her girlhood, a rebellious girlhood, full of revolt against all the conventions of her time, all the sentiments of her surroundings.

"I tell you," she cried at last, "that I too was strong. But I made a great discovery. I found that there were things which strength could not

touch. Love laughs at strength; happiness, real happiness, is practically made up of all the things we call weakness. I can thank God now that Owen was never happy. I thought once that he was: that his cruelty was a great joy to him. But it wasn't. I can see that now. Because he had no weakness—no moments of tenderness—nothing to throw it into relief.

"Strength!" She looked suddenly full into Alison's eyes. "Yes. You may have strength enough to kill your own human capacity for feeling, for tears, for kisses, for all the wonderful stupidities which you've inherited by your womanhood—but what then? What then?" Her voice dropped to a whisper.

"Strength kills everything, in the end—everything, even Owen's happiness, I thank the just God: yes, strength, alone, is a killer."

Before they knew it she was at the door—it was closing behind her. Alison was silent, Harold did not move. How many seconds they remained there in the flickering gaslight they did not know, but, suddenly, they heard a faltering step coming up the stairs from the hall.

"My God!" whispered Harold, "she's going though her programme. What she came to do! Getting the thrill of being alone: trying to start life all over again!"

The steps passed the door of the sitting-room. Alison's voice broke in, uncertainly:

"That woman is indomitable,"she said, "indomitable;" and then, as if the picture suddenly sprang to life in front of her eyes, "My God! that round-faced, red-cheeked old man! My God!"

She turned away her head and Harold heard her whispering to herself. He caught a few words.

". . . and I thought *I* was strong," she was saying. "All those years—all those years! And she is starting over again, now!"

She rose slowly, unsteadily.

"I think," said Harold, "I had better go upstairs and dress."

"I will come up, too," she answered.

The dim-lit passage leading to their bedroom was very silent. Under a door on their right a lamp threw a thin yellow line along the further wall. Harold clutched Alison's arm.

"That's her room . . . the one she shared with—with him!"

The girl took a step forward, then stopped suddenly.

"Harold," she said, "there . . . there's no sound."

The man felt a perfectly unreasonable panic seize him, as if a pair of cold arms had been thrown suddenly about his knees.

"Knock," she whispered.

He raised his voice in the exaggeration of terror.

"But why?—why?" he cried.

"Knock!" she whispered again.

He seized her arm.

"What is it, Alison? Of what are you afraid?"

"I don't know," she said. "There is something stirring in me which I don't understand. That round red-faced man! Years and years—and *she* was strong, too!"

"Was?" Harold's voice shook.

"Is that why you want me to knock?" he whispered.

She said nothing, and he rapped with his knuckles upon the door. There was no sound. He knocked again, breathing fast. Then he turned the handle and pushed open the door.

Loveday Weare lay, fully dressed, stretched across the big bed from corner to corner, her arms flung out, in the shape of a cross. Her eyes were open, staring at the ceiling, but the fire of the two aquamarines had left them. Her pale thin lips still smiled triumphantly at the vision of the last effort her imagination would ever make.

"Oh, God!" murmured Harold, kneeling by the bedside. He heard his wife's voice, coming from the other side of the room.

"I understand," Alison was saying. "She must have suffered here more than anywhere—when everyone else was holiday-making. She came to triumph over those sufferings; to start life over again, from the worst starting-point of all! Strong? It must have needed some strength to

come and take it all up again from just this point!"

She took the thin withered hand and held it in her own.

Harold looked up wildly.

"But," he cried, "she was all right downstairs—she was all right. What has killed her?"

"Her own strength has killed her," answered Alison slowly. "She thought she could face this room. She believed in her own strength though she knew that strength alone . . . was a killer. That was what she said, to us."

Harold nodded.

"She was determined to go through with it," he said.

"Yes," answered Alison, "and then when she got here, she broke her heart . . . that's all."

"Broke her heart?"

"Yes. Either because of a great, tremendous joy, or because of a terrible fear!"

She looked about the room with a shudder.

"We shall never know which," she added simply.

For some seconds they stood looking at one another across the figure lying so unnaturally across the bed. It flashed through Harold's mind that no one, besides themselves, would ever know the awful symbolism of that attitude. Suddenly, he saw Alison sink down beside the bed, with a queer, strangled moan.

"Harold," she said, "I'm frightened! I'm frightened!"

In a moment he was by her side, his arm round her.

"It's not—not her being dead. I'm frightened because—because I've been so proud . . . so proud! . . . and I've never fought anything in my life! I'm frightened in case the things . . . all the things she spoke of may not be left for me! I'm frightened because I'm small—because I don't feel strong any more! Oh, Harold, I'm frightened, I'm frightened!"

He took her in his arms on the floor, stroking her head. Her fingers clutched at his like a baby's, instinctively expecting protection. Harold smiled, suddenly, happily. He drew her closer to him, forgetting, in the new Alison, what else kept them company in the room.

On the bed, the dead woman still stared at the ceiling, with her ironically triumphant smile.

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